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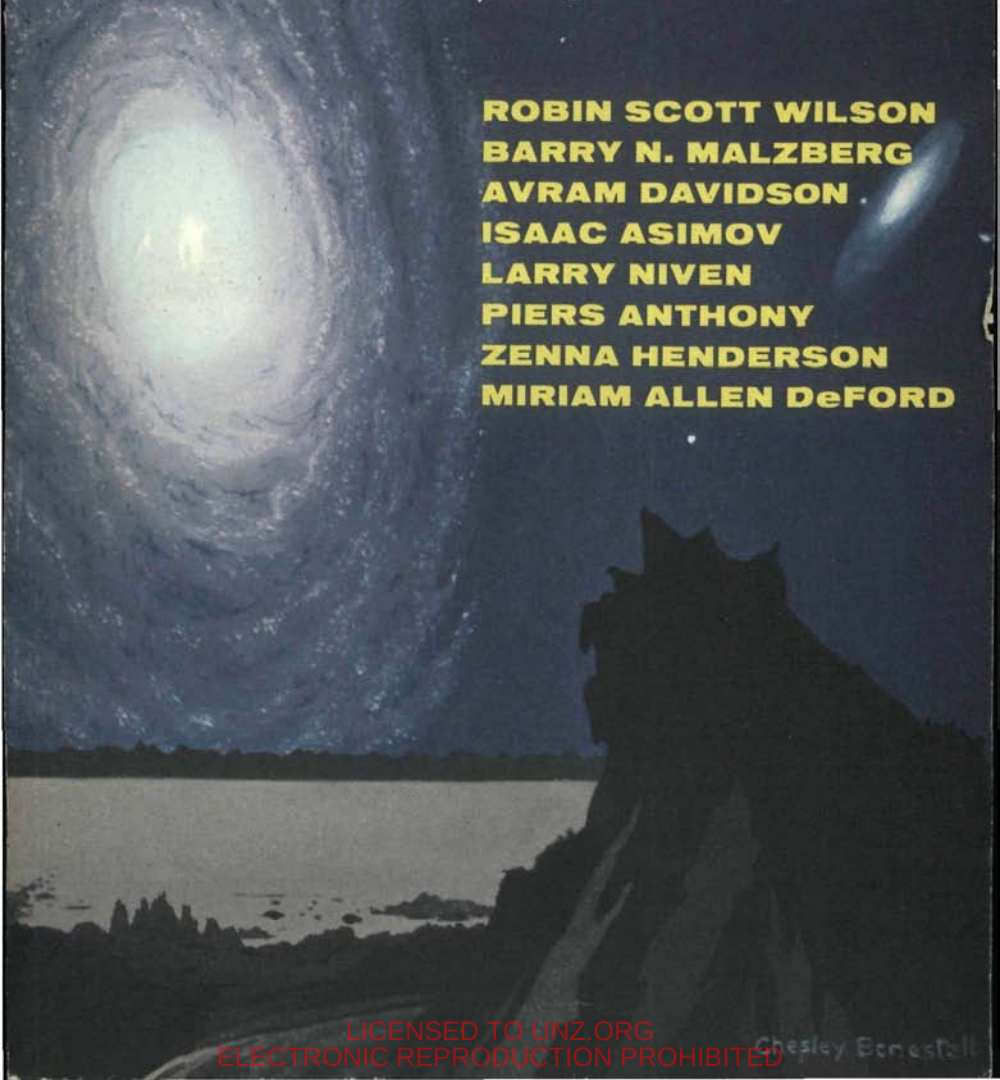

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Robin Wilson has been consistently inventive and entertaining in these pages (most recently with THE STATE OF THE ART, *July 1970 and* A DELICATE OPERATION, *January 1970). His latest story is a suspense filled account of a telepathic spy—one of "ours"—and what happens when a U. S. agent trys to move him from Moscow to Washington.*

GONE FISHIN'

by Robin Scott Wilson

THEY HAD BRIEFED ME IN Washington just before I took off for Frankfurt, but it had been pretty sketchy; you don't need to know much about a case to perform escort courier duty. I knew only that this boy—Kurt Johnston—was some kind of mental freak; other than that there was just the standard info: physical description, date and place of birth, security clearance. He was black enough, God knows. Darker than my own *cafe au lait* which, before black became beautiful, was a source of secretive pride but open embarrassment to my mother, who used Royal Creme Pomade to straighten my sister Kitty's hair and sang a lot about Jesus while she ironed. "Honkie bastard" was what our neighbor, a fat, evil-smelling lady named Mrs. Beamis called me when she came over one night to bitch about me messing around with her Sadie. But that was way back in the late forties, when I was just old enough to wander out of the grits-and-grease smell and into trouble on U Street NE in Our Nation's Capital, before I was old enough to wander all the way out.

He made me think a little of Lena Horne, for whom I used to have the hots in the way you did toward movie stars back in the days when movies were lasciviously chaste and not pornographic, when they didn't show

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people screwing and you could look at a beautiful woman and—since no one else was having her—imagine you were; back when "Stormy Weather" was the only black and white you could see in living color, and Sidney Poitier hadn't come to dinner yet, and Lela White hadn't yet been seduced by Dustin Hoffman or whatever his name was.

Same pinched, almost semitic features, as if Haile Selassie had scattered his maker's image through the land, fathering Lena and grandfathering this boy; straight little nose: she could flare a nostril like nobody's business when she inhaled dramatically about four bars into "Bill Bailey," and I'd get shaky sitting there in the balcony of the Grand thinking about me and Lena and listening to the sibilant whispers of "shee-it, man" chorusing around me in the dark, which I guess gives you a good idea of how old I am.

And he wore his hair in a full Afro, pretty much the way Petey had after his first semester at Princeton, after he stopped answering our letters and—I guess—went Panther. But there was nothing of Petey's wiry build about this boy, this Kurt Johnston. When he stood up for the introduction, stiffly, German style, he stuck up out of the ground a good half a foot above my five foot eight, and there was lots of muscle under his bulging, too-tight German schoolboy's jacket. Difficult to believe he was only fourteen.

"Sehr Angenehm, Mister Bronstein," he said, acknowledging our introduction with formulary precision, bowing slightly, almost clicking his heels.

"Freut mich sehr," I said, unconsciously adopting the nigger-who-made-it-good stiffness toward another, unknown black man. It went with the German. *"Aber sprichst du kein englisch?"* I used the familiar *du* form because I knew he was only fourteen. Without the briefing, I would have used the formal *Sie:* so adult did he look; so much power did he seem to radiate.

"Yes, sir," he said a little haltingly, in a voice that still cracked a bit. "I am speaking the English very well."

Even after fifteen years off and on in European operations, I am still a little startled when I meet a black man whose native tongue is German. But of course there are many thousands of them after thirty-five years of American troops in the *Bundesrepublik.* They are the progeny of black soldiers who have suddenly found they are members of a minority so small that it becomes less a disadvantage than simply a curiosity; who have played out the big black stud bull animalistic image their white comrades have established for them, who have screwed white girls or the mulatto daughters of

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their predecessors-in-arms because there are no other girls, because there is still some status in screwing white, because they buy the myth and play the role a dominant culture has assigned them, because there still are not enough Lena Hornes to go around for all the little black boys in balconies who stiffen up watching the latest white sex-goddess and whisper "shee-it, mother!" to one another in the sticky popcorn dark.

Still, it is startling. But who am I to be surprised at ethnic oddities? A black man with a Jewish name who started out as a showcase negro in 1960 and played the system the right, cautious, uptight way and made it big in twenty years of government service; a good establishment-nigger who for most of that time did not think of himself as a Tom, so far had he wandered from the grease-and-grits; a not very black man who never heard that ancient phrase, "to cross over," without a pang and whose occasional, crushing, obliterating sense of guilt was maybe a little bit requited by a son who died of a cerebral hemorrhage induced by a nightstick. In Chicago, twelve years ago, they called them "batons," as if the fuzz—no, that was Petey's word—as if the police used them to conduct the chorus of chanting militants, *andante con moto,* in "Hell no, we won't go!" I guess Petey and the others were still chanting it eleven years later at Princeton. But, my God! Whatever I thought I was then, I never thought I was a New Jersey State Policeman!

Yes. Well. There in the Air Force ready room of the Rhine-Main air terminal just outside Frankfurt, walled about with chipped blue-gray plywood, fall-leaf littered with squashed paper coffee cups cradling drowned brown cigarette butts, Ed Gary completed the introduction and said to me, "Well, Peter, he's your package now. You wanted temporary courier duty, and you got yourself a real piss-cutter this time."

I nodded. I'd known Ed a long time, since we'd learned the business together at the Berlin Wall. He would never say or even think "some of my best friends . . ." but for him it was true. "You want to fill me in?" I said.

Ed beckoned me over toward the curtained windows, away from the two men and the boy they were protecting. Except for the five of us, the ready room was deserted, cleared of its usual crowd of transiting servicemen.

When we were out of earshot, Ed said, "This is a rough one. Have you been briefed on COKE-BOTTLE?"

The word—a code name—rang a bell. "Yes, I think so. When I was Chief in Copenhagen a couple of years ago, there was

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something about digging through school psychologists' records all over the place, some kind of computer analysis to find . . . what was it? Some kind of special mental attributes?"

"Telepaths."

"Telepaths!" I was genuinely surprised. I hadn't known all that much about COKEBOTTLE. There had, obviously, been no need for me to know. "I didn't know *that!*"

"Yeah. In '77 the Psycho-Medical staff came up with a special requirements list, and the Outfit ran a massive search everywhere they could in the West. From what they tell me, they had a pretty good idea what to look for from studies of certain cases of juvenile catatonia, and what they wanted to find was a kid who looked like he might have the characteristics of a latent telepath, but hadn't developed it to a point where it would get to him. That was COKEBOTTLE."

"Um," I said, beginning to understand. "I remember the search, or at least the little piece of it in Denmark in '78. I don't think they found much of anything there. I thought at the time it was pretty much of a boondoggle."

"Well, it wasn't. They didn't find anything in Denmark or the U.S. or much of anywhere except here in Germany." He nodded toward the boy seated across the room reading a *Micky Maus* comic book. "Maybe it was because he was the only black kid in the *Kinderheim*. Got used to being different before the talent hit him. . . . Right, Kurt?" Ed's voice was barely audible to me, but the boy looked up, smiled, and nodded.

"You mean he's a telepath?" I couldn't suppress the astonishment in my voice, although I usually come on pretty cool. It is part of my schtik. "He can read minds?" Ed nodded and the boy nodded as if they were strung to a single puppeteer. "Come on now," I said. "You must be kidding me." Of course, I didn't really disbelieve Ed at all; elaborate practical jokes are not part of life in the Outfit. But still I had to show disbelief; it is part of human nature to solicit more information by expressing doubt. Think of the folks who learned aerodynamics by saying: "What? Two bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, have built a machine that flies? Horseshit!"

"Yeah, I know," said Ed. He flicked his eyes in Kurt's direction. The boy rose, carefully laid his comic book open on the settee, and walked across the room to join us. The two men started to follow him, but Ed waved them back. They had no need to know. Out loud, Ed said, "Do you mind a little demonstration, Kurt? You know how it is with new ones."

"No. I do not mind, Mr. Gary."

I thought: what a splendid-looking boy he is. How strange it

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would be if the successor to Homo sapiens should be the result of racial intermarriage on a new, broad scale. What a blow it would be to the racists—both kinds—if somehow the massive mixing of genes should produce a whole new race with the beauty and strength of this boy. And maybe a new kind of mind. . . .

The boy said, "Thank you, Mr. Bronstein. I try to keep healthy, I exercise with *die Hantel*—uh—barbells? But please do not think me to be some freak or new thing. My father was an American, like you. My mother was a German, I think *eine Mulattin wie Sie.* There are other boys like me in other—uh—*Kinderheim,* but think they do not understand the *thinking.* And—uh—*Rassenhass* . . ." He was stuck for the word and looked questioningly at me.

"Race hatred. Racism."

". . . *Ja* . . . race hatred will always be here no matter what is happening, no?"

"Yes. Of course."

"But," he added a little shyly, "I am happy that you are not one, not a—uh—racist."

I thought: my God, he really can read minds! There are things there he should not see. I felt embarrassed, like a kid surprised in a locked bathroom.

The boy smiled broadly. "Do not worry, Mr. Bronstein. I do not pry. Only things that are now, up on top, when you think. Other things are very hard for me and very unpleasant."

"Here," said Ed, handing me a newspaper. "Read something to yourself from this and you'll see why the Outfit has been interested in Kurt and what he's been able to do for us. Okay, Kurt?"

The boy nodded and I began to read silently. It was a copy of that day's Paris edition of *The New York Times.* As I read, Kurt spoke rapidly, much more rapidly than his English conversation: "Richmond, 14 April 1980 (AP). Black Co-op Party Chairman Enoch Jarvis announced today a broad new range of economic sanctions against consumer-oriented businesses, including specific corporations in publishing, chemicals, transportation, and the ailing automotive industry. The BCP, now under investigation by a Federal Grand Jury, has in recent months. . . ." I stopped reading and Kurt fell silent.

"Okay," I said. "I'm convinced." And then I realized and whistled. Kurt smiled before I said, "The perfect espionage agent! He can read anybody's secret files anywhere, as long as someone else is reading them!"

"Not quite anywhere," said Ed. "We had to teach him Russian, for instance. And his range is only a couple of dozen miles."

"Then you must have had him in . . . ?"

"Moscow. Right. For over a

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year. In an embassy apartment six kilometers from the Gorky Street KGB headquarters. We cleaned them out before they tumbled to it."

"How'd they find out?"

"We don't know. They've been doing a lot of research in ESP too. Maybe they've got their own Kurt. We don't know. All we know is that they are committing everything they've got to get hold of Kurt, or kill him. We've lost three men just moving him this far."

I looked at the boy with sympathy, my right hand moving automatically to the clip on my waistband and the .38 Police Special nestled there. "Are you frightened, Kurt?"

"Yes, sir. But when I come to America, everything will be all right." I looked at Ed and tried to suppress the thought. "Yes," said Kurt. "I know that not everything in America will be good. But there I will not be so different. There are others of my color. It will be harder for them to find me."

Standing there in the oddly deserted ready room, I remembered Petey's statement one evening the previous summer, just before he returned to Princeton for the last time. We had maintained a polite, low-key debate all summer, I not so much disagreeing with his growing militancy as acting as a sounding board for his ideas. That evening, on the back steps of the house in McLean, he had said, "But, dad, nobody ever got anything without a struggle, and it's these little local actions that give us the experience for the big ones."

"Okay," I had said. "But what else do they accomplish? And look at the risk."

He had stood up then and pointed to the stars just breaking into light. "Like stars, or fish in the ocean, dad. The Man sees us that way. To the Man, we all look alike. We are only twelve percent, and we need leaders, right? The danger is when we all look alike to each other. Guys like me are learning how to be the different ones, the leaders."

"Yes," I had said, unable to keep the sad cynicism out of my voice. "And guys like Huey Newton and Martin Luther King and Fred Hampton and Malcolm X and George Maxwell—dead men don't make very effective leaders."

Petey had shrugged and given me a look I wish to God I'd never seen. "Neither," he said, "do GS-16s in the government." It had been one of those futile, wounding, incoherent conversations that I guess all fathers have with their college-age sons.

But Kurt was right, of course. A little cosmetic work by the Outfit's specialists, a new identity, submergence in a heterogeneous population: To the Man, we all look alike. I admired the boy's courage. Aloud, I said, "Right,

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son. We'll make it all right." Why, I wondered, had I said "son"?

Kurt smiled at me with the look lonely boys have. There was something between us that we both knew. Maybe it was just race. Maybe it was something more. For the first time, I consciously communicated to him without verbalizing. *You know, don't you. About Petey and the Princeton riot. About Mary and me, about the guilt and feeling lost. Why I'm working as a courier instead of a country chief. The distraction of keeping on the move, and Mary keeping busy in the Black Co-op movement, trying to pay the bill for twenty years of noninvolvement; and I am pulling further and further back into myself trying to understand if "Black American" is a contradiction in terms and losing, every day, losing a little more of identification with. . . . But why do I need to confess to a fourteen-year-old boy?*

"Yes," said Kurt, his smile gone. "I understand. There is a gap." Ed looked from one of us to the other, suddenly outside. There was a prolonged silence. "I think you better get going, Peter," he said.

I swam back up from the painful depths of introspection and gave my head a quick little nervous shake of impatience. "Right. What have you laid on?"

"Well, we think you are okay here so far. We've got positive control on the airfield. General Conners has got the 3745th APs all over the place, and there's an MP detachment from Heidelberg spread out around the perimeter."

I nodded. "Are we flying MATS?"

"No. We're sending a decoy out to the MATS 747. You're going commercial superson. There's a Pan Am flight direct to Dulles. The KGB won't be expecting that."

"Sort of the purloined letter bit, hey?"

"That's the idea." Ed looked at his watch. "The decoy will be moving out now." He parted the curtain on the window overlooking the flight line. Down on the field, a blue Air Force Mercedes was drawing up to the side of the MATS 747. Two men got out, one a tall, burly negro, the other a shorter black man. They moved hurriedly up the boarding ramp and the aircraft door swung shut behind them. Almost instantly, the massive old plane began to move out the taxi strip toward the downwind end of the runway. I turned away from the window. "Come on, Kurt. If there're any KGB heavies around, they'll be making a play for the MATS plane. Let's get going."

Ed said, "Go directly to the Pan Am boarding gate and mingle with the other passengers. We'll have the whole area covered." He handed me our tickets, and Kurt

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and I left the ready room, walked through the Air Force administrative spaces, and entered the main passenger terminal. The loading area for our flight was crowded; the Boeing superson carries just over three hundred people in both classes. I stuck close to Kurt as we filed through the gate and walked with the hurrying crowd to our plane. Out at the end of the field, I could see the big MATS plane turning to start its takeoff run. Suddenly there was a black plume of smoke and a few seconds later the sound of an explosion reached our ears. The 747 burst into flame and skidded off the runway and slewed violently in the grass, one giant wing dropping and crumpled. Fire sirens screamed and men rushed to vehicles.

"Rockets!" shouted Ed, who was just behind us in the crowd. "They got it with rockets!" We kept on going, across the ramp and up the stairs and into the interior of the superson. Ed stayed behind at the foot of the steps, his eyes busy on the crowd, his pistol half drawn. A few people who had preceded us into the plane and had seen the explosion out the starboard windows rose from their seats, scrabbled coats and packages from the overhead rack, and headed back toward the door, their taste for flying suddenly gone. There was considerable confusion in the aisles.

I got Kurt into a seat and stood out of the aisle watching everyone who came aboard. Kurt looked up at me. "Mr. Bronstein, there is a man. He has a gun. Under his raincoat. It is black . . ."

I had my pistol out and was firing before the man with the black raincoat draped over his arm was able to get off a shot. He fell backward through the door and into the passengers behind him. Someone in the tower must have given the pilot the word. The door slammed shut on the confused and screaming group at the head of the steps, and a moment later the plane began to move. The pilot swung the aircraft through ninety degrees and fed full power to the engines. The taxiway was clear and long enough, and the pilot took off directly, using it as a substitute runway. We were airborne in seconds and there was no rocket fire.

By the time we had reached cruising altitude, the hostesses had most of the passengers quieted down. They were a white-faced bunch, following us with their eyes as we went forward to the cockpit. I wanted to talk to the captain. Judging from the magnitude and desperation of the KGB effort at Rhine-Main, we could anticipate something almost as desperate at Dulles when we landed three hours later. Espionage agents—professionals—taking pot shots at each other in dark

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alleys is one thing; a suicidal rocket attack on a passenger aircraft is something else again. God knew what they would have waiting for us at Dulles; it didn't occur to me then that we had anything else to worry about. All I could think of was that it was essential that the crew be persuaded to land at some other airport, somewhere where the KGB could not be expecting us.

Kurt was round-eyed with a boy's excitement, full of questions about the aircraft, most of which I could not answer. He seemed blithely unconcerned about the attempts on his life. When I thought that, hustling him forward up the aisle, he shrugged and said, "There is nothing I can do about it." And then, without drawing breath, he said, "How high are we, Mr. Bronstein? How fast does the airplane fly? How many passengers will it carry? How long does it last, this flight? Is this a bigger airplane than the Concorde? I have ridden once upon a Concorde. From Moscow to Rome once I have ridden upon an Illyushin. But they are not so big I think and not so fast as this Boeing."

Up forward, I turned Kurt and his questions over to the first officer and sat with the captain at the navigator's bench. He was a middle-aged man named Greyson, and he was worried. "I don't know what this is all about, Mr. Bronstein," he said, "but I've got almost two hundred passengers back there and I don't want any more trouble."

I explained the situation to him as well as I could, leaving out the intelligence aspects of it. "So you see, we can expect similar difficulties at Dulles."

Greyson nodded. "All right, I'll radio for clearance at Baltimore Friendship."

"No. No radio. They'll have you on radar anyway. I want you to call for emergency landing clearance as soon as you get in the Friendship pattern. I don't want any radio until you're just ready to land."

Greyson shook his head. "I don't know. I'm in enough trouble already with that hairy takeoff at Rhine-Main. . . ."

"Don't worry, Captain. My organization will square it with the FAA and your company."

"You got that much clout?"

I showed him the little card in my billfold, the one with the Presidential seal. He nodded and shrugged. "You got that much clout."

The third officer, who was minding the store, shouted, "Captain! We got aircraft approaching! Radar shows them bearing zero one zero and closing at 1300."

The captain took three quick strides to the left-hand seat, slipped his earphones on, and said to me, "Bronstein! These KGB

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people wouldn't go after a flag aircraft in the middle of the Atlantic, would they?"

I said, "I don't know. They may be desperate enough to try anything." Kurt, who had been standing behind the first officer, said, "They're—uh—*freundlich*, Mr. Bronstein. They come from some place in Iceland."

The captain turned in his seat and looked curiously at Kurt. "How do you know, young man?"

Kurt looked at me questioningly. "He just knows," I said.

Simmons, the third officer, said, "Radar shows them at five miles. They've turned parallel to us. They ought to be visual." It was a clear, bright afternoon above the cloud-decked Atlantic. I peered out through the navigator's window. Off to the south, three specks raced along with us. I couldn't make out the type, but Simmons, who had binoculars, could. "The kid's right. They're F-115s."

The navigator had resumed his position behind me to monitor the radar at his desk. "Three more!" he said. "Coming up fast at one one zero!"

"They are Russians," said Kurt. "They have orders to *ubivaht*—uh—*zerstoren*—this aircraft!" There was no fear in the boy's voice. Only great excitement.

I translated: "Destroy!"

"Give me full power, Al!" shouted the captain, and the flight engineer got busy at his console. The F-115s wheeled out in front of us and zipped back past us to the east and the threat there.

Kurt said, "It is getting dim to me; the distance. . . . But one of them has died. A Russian. Another is not dead yet, but he thinks only of his mother, and he is *ohnmachtige*—un—unconscious."

"Probably passed out in a high-G turn," said Greyson. "They must be dogfighting." There was just the slightest sound of envy in his voice. Kurt looked up at him. "I would like someday to hear about your forty-eight missions in Korea, sir."

I was suddenly struck with how completely we all accepted Kurt's power. I had not hesitated to shoot the man with the raincoat draped over his arm. Greyson accepted Kurt's interpretation of the events behind us—now many miles—without really questioning it. Such was the boy's presence, his obvious calm control. A drama was being acted out behind us, maybe fifty miles or so, in the clear April sky. I hoped only that it would stay behind us.

The captain called for a fuel report and ordered cruise power again. Simmons reported another flight of three aircraft entering escort pattern with us. Kurt confirmed that they were friendly. "They are from some place called Argentia. One of the pilots is very

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angry because he had to miss something. He calls it a 'heavy date' in his head, and. . . ." He broke off in fourteen-year-old confusion. "I do not entirely understand."

Laughter is a good cathartic, and the tension in the cockpit diminished. Greyson surrendered the left-hand seat to the first officer and joined me once again at the navigator's bench. "I got to hand it to you, Bronstein. Your people seem to have thought of everything. It's good to see those 115s out there."

"Yeah. I don't think either of us knows just how valuable your cargo is this trip." And then it struck me just how valuable this boy was. What power! Not only could he clean out the files of the Gorky Street KGB headquarters, he could handle tactical situations with calm and intelligence. No one engaged in conflict of any sort could stand against an operational intelligence system such as Kurt, single-handed—or should one say single-minded? —represented. No wonder the Sovs were willing to do anything to see the end of him.

Do anything. Land-based rocket attack. Mig-27 air attack. What else lay in their arsenal? MIRV's? Targeting would be a problem, and they wouldn't dare use nukes. Kurt wasn't worth *that* much to them. That left. . . .

"Kurt!" The sound of my own voice startled me. "How did you detect the hostile aircraft?"

He was startled too and a little at a loss to answer properly. It was like asking someone how he smells onions. "Why—uh—why, when the man said he saw aircraft on the radar, I thought about the aircraft, in that direction, and I heard . . . no . . . *verstand* . . . what they were doing. I—uh—"

"Okay, Kurt. That's all right." There was obviously no word for what he did. "But now, think down. Down to the sea and under the sea. A small room. Many dials and gauges. A man in a submarine—*ein Unterseeboot. Siehst du was?*"

There was a moment of dead silence, only the buzzing hum of the autopilot as it corrected for the weight of a passenger walking aft to the toilet. Then: "Yes! Mr. Bronstein, yes! There is something down. A green room with many, many lights and dials. Like this, only bigger." He waved his arm around the cockpit. "And a man. He is counting backward in Russian, *vo'sem, sem, shest, pyat. . . .*"

"Yeah, Greyson!" I shouted. "A submarine! They're counting down! Surface-to-air!"

Greyson was back in his seat before I had finished. "Seatbelts!" he shouted. "Full power!" He twisted his head to glance at me. "We're at 45,000 feet, Bronstein. How much time from launch?"

I did some quick calculations,

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trying to recall the characteristics of the SAM's we knew were deployed on the Z-class nuclears that cruised the North Atlantic. "Seventeen or eighteen seconds at most."

"Dva, adin—uh—*feur!* He pushed a button, this man, and said 'fire'!" Kurt's excitement confused his tongue.

"Hang on!" said Greyson, and I was thrown hard against the bulkhead as he kicked hard left rudder. Kurt tumbled back against me, and I put an arm around his shoulders in instinctual protectiveness, even though—at fourteen—he outweighed me by twenty pounds. He did not shrink from my embrace. There was a moment of crushing weight and then a lightening and then the horizon outside the windows straightened again. There was a noiseless blast a mile or so off to port and the plane jumped like a car crossing railroad tracks.

Kurt stirred in my arms and pulled himself erect. "They count again," he said. There was a look of real joy on his face, a look Petey used to have at baseball games. He was enjoying the whole thing as only a fourteen-year-old could. Me, I was so scared I feared for continuing sphincter control. *"Desyat, devyat, vosem. . . ."* counted Kurt in Russian.

"Gimme full power again!" There was sudden acceleration and another tight, climbing turn. Again, I was crushed to the deck with Kurt, a tight fetal ball, curled against me. Like a kid who has lit the fuse to the biggest cherry bomb he could find and waits, full of pleasurable anticipation, for the neighborhood, the city, the state, the world to explode. I wondered how the passengers were taking it back aft. We straightened out on our original course. Another soundless blast shook the aircraft from two miles away.

"What's the range of those goddamn SAMs, Bronstein?"

"Fifty miles, max."

"Okay. We ought to be clear unless there's another sub ahead of us." He looked questioningly at Kurt, who shook his head. There was just the slightest look of disappointment in his fine, coffee features. "All right, Al," said the captain. "Lets drop back to cruise."

A stewardess came in through the cockpit door, and Greyson met her anxious look with words of reassurance. "Tell the passengers we were evading a thunderhead."

"At 45,000 feet?"

"They won't know the difference. Tell them we are all clear now. Tell them we'll be landing in about forty-five minutes and that because of weather at Dulles, we'll have to land at Friendship."

"Hold it," I said. "Don't tell them that. Don't mention it to anybody." The stewardess looked at me and then at Greyson. He

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nodded. "Do like the man says, honey."

The rest of the flight went without incident. No more Migs, no more submarines. Kurt continued his interrogation of the first officer, his enthusiasm for the details of the aircraft unabated. Only now and then did he pause a few seconds as if he were listening for something. I subsided into the jump seat behind Greyson and thought about the reception to come, about what the Outfit could do to protect this boy, about the years ahead of him guarded everywhere, a secret weapon, property of the state. He would be America's secret weapon, all right. With him, everything was open to us, anything was possible. We had something better than the ultimate weapon; we had the ultimate source of knowledge about everybody's ultimate weapon. It saddened me, somehow.

When we were in the landing pattern over Baltimore, Greyson called for and was granted emergency landing clearance, and I put in a call to headquarters, redirecting whatever escort they had arranged to Friendship. The plane landed, and Greyson taxied up to the ramp. The passengers debarked, but Kurt and I stayed behind, waiting for the escort to come for us.

They had done an elaborate job. A heavily armored semitrailer and six-place cab was waiting for us. There were enough armed men to guard Fort Knox. As soon as we were in the truck cab, I asked Joe D'Amore if all the fuss wouldn't attract too much attention.

"Sure. It might. But I think we've got it whipped." He slid back a hatchway in the rear of the cab as we pulled out onto the Baltimore-Washington turnpike. "You and the boy can go back into the trailer through here." Back in the gloom was a battered '74 Buick. "As soon as we reach a blind pulloff on the parkway, we'll drop you off in the car. If there's any KGB around and they want to follow the truck the rest of the night, fine. You won't be in it."

I nodded. It was the purloined letter business again. Kurt and I scrambled back through the hatch and got into the Buick. The Outfit had been thorough, as usual. There were even some old cane poles sticking out through the rear windows. What could be less suspicious, less worth the attention of the most dangerous espionage agency in the world than two black men cruising through the soft April evening along the Baltimore-Washington turnpike, going fishing?

They all look alike, don't they?

Just south of the AEC turnoff there is a pulloff. We had the Buick out of the semi and were bowling down the turnpike alone within thirty seconds. I took a tor-

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tuous course through Silver Springs and then over on the Circumferential to Bethesda, where I drove up one street and down another, checking for a tail.

There was nothing, although a Bethesda police car followed us for a while, until they were sure we were leaving their jurisdiction. We were home free. Now all I had to do was to drive over into Virginia to the Outfit. There, I would be relieved of my charge, and Kurt would begin his new life.

But something was bothering me. A whole lot of things, a year, twenty years, a lifetime of things were suddenly bothering me. I pulled off the Circumferential and drove up the narrow road into the seclusion of Potomac Park. We were safe enough there. And inconspicuous. Two black men with fishing poles. I stopped, and in the fading twilight, I turned to face the young man beside me. He looked at me, sweetly calm, trusting. "Kurt," I said. "You are a very powerful human being."

He grinned. "Yes, I know." There wasn't a shred of arrogance in his voice.

"What do you want to do with your power?"

He waggled his head in uncertainty. "I am not sure. I want to do things, good things. I want to do things for my—people."

"America, you mean? Your country?"

"Yes. So far."

"And do you see America and Mr. Gary and me and the government as all the same thing?"

Kurt waited a while before he answered me, his fine features glazed by the diminishing light. In profile, the resemblance to Lena Horne was striking, although there was nothing the least feminine about his face. "No. Not really the same thing," he answered with some hesitation. "You and Mr. Gary and the government are all *part* of America, but it is perhaps something more." He hesitated again and then added, his manner more firm, his words more forceful: "I think I want to help America be what it should be, maybe not what it wants to be. Do you understand? I am not sure of the words. . . ."

"I understand. And that's what I wanted to know. But there is maybe something more." I hesitated in an odd embarrassment, my thoughts ahead of my tongue, braver.

"I understand," he said when I paused. "About your son Petey and the gap and why you are confused about what it is to be a Negro in this country in this time. I understand, and, yes, I would be flattered to be considered so by you. But perhaps your wife, perhaps she might feel differently about me. . . ."

"Ha!" I said explosively, suddenly sure of myself, suddenly

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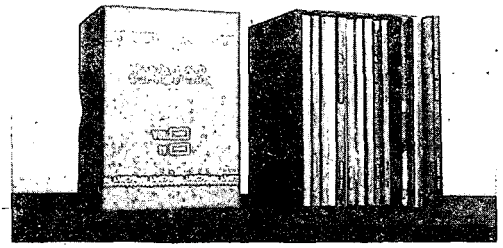
aware of who I was, sliding the old Buick into motion again with an exuberant jerk. "There is a kind of telepathy between married folks, too, son. You'll see. Mary will be. . . ." I was overcome with emotion. I drove down to the Circumferential again and headed south toward Richmond. At the first pulloff in Virginia, I stopped to use the telephone.

When I returned, Kurt looked at me expectantly. "Don't worry, son," I said. "Everything's fine. Mary will meet us in Richmond. She is very happy. She will call the right people, and they will arrange things for us."

"And the people you work for? And Mr. Gary and the others? What will they think?"

"Mr. Gary, at least, will understand, I think. I will not want them to think you have been captured by the Soviets. I will send them a telegram in the next few days. I will write: *'Angeln gegangen.'* "

"Ah," said Kurt, struggling to translate into the idiomatic English he would need. "That means 'gone fishing. . . .' "



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For reasons which will quickly become obvious, this manuscript has not been set in our usual elegant type face (fairfield medium, if you've ever wondered) but has been reproduced exactly as received. It is a fantastic story of retribution that you are about to read, as chilling as anything in the history of "editorial correspondence" (letters about money, if you've ever wondered).

SELECTRA SIX-TEN

by Avram Davidson

His Honor the Ed., F&SF
Dear Ed:
Well, whilst sorry that you didn't feel BELINDA BEESWAX didn't exactly and immediately leap up and wrap her warm, white (or, in this case, cold) arms around you, so to speak, nevertheless I am bound to admit that your suggestions for its revision don't altogether seem difficult or unreasonable. Though, mind you, it is against my moral principles to admi this to any editor. Even you. However. This once. I'll do, I think I shd be able to do the rewrites quite soonly, and whip them off to you with the speed of light. At least, the speed of whatever dim light it is which filters through the window of our local Post Office and its 87,000 friendly branches throughout the country.

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By the way, excuse absence of mrag, or even marger
Oh you would would you. Take that. And THAT.
AND THSTHATHAT. har har, he laughed harshly. The
lack of m a r g i n s. There. I have just gotten a
new tripewriter, viz an Selectra Six-Ten, with
Automated Carriage
Return
Return
Return
hahahaHA! I can't resist it, just impress the tab
and without sweat or indeed evidence of
labor of any swort, or sort, whatsoever,
ZING.
RETURN! You will excsuse me, won't you? There I
knew you would. A wild lad, Master Edward, I sez
to the Gaffer, I sez, but lor blesse zur its just
hanimal sperrits, at art h's a good lad, I sez.
WELL. Enough of this lollygagging ansd skylarking
Ferman. I am a WORKING WORITER and so to business.
Although, mind ewe, with this Device it seems more
like play. It hums and clicks and buzzes whilst
I am congor even cog cog cog got it now? gooood.
cogitating. very helpful to thought. Soothing. So.
WHERE we was. Yus. BELINDA BEESWAX. Soonly. I
haven't forgotten that advance I got six years ago
when ny wife had the grout. Anxious to please.
(Tugs forelock. Exit, pursued by a
Your Seruant to Command,
Avram

Eddy dear;
I mean, of course, Mr Ferman Sir. Or is it now
Squire Ferman, with you off in the moors and crags
of Cornwall Connecticut. Sounds very Jamaica Inn,
Daphne Du Maurieresque. I can see you on wild and
stormy nights, muffled to your purple ears in your
cloak and shawl, going out on the rocky headlands
with False Lights to decoy the Fall River Line

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vessels, or even the Late After-Theater Special of the New York, New Haven, and Hartburn, onto the Rocks. And the angry rocks they gored her sides /Like the horns of an angry bull. Zounds they don't indite Poerty like that anymore. I mean, I don't have to tell you, ethn ethic pride, all very well, enthic? e t h n i c, there, THAT wasn't hard, was it deary? Noooo. Now you can ahve a piece of treacle. Where was I. I mean, my grandfather was a was a, well, acttually, no, he WAS n 't a Big Rabbi In The Old Country, he drove a laundry wagon in Yonkers, N.Y., but what Imeantosayis: "Over the rocks and the foaming brine/They burned the wreck of the Palatine "—can ALAN GUINZBURG write poetry like that? No. Fair is fair,
Zippetty-ping. Kerriage Return. Automatic. Whheee! After all Ed I have known you a very long time, that time your old girl friend, the one you hired to read Manuscripts, you remember? Nuf sed. And I know you have only my own welfare at heart. Right? Right. So you wouldn't be angry when I explain that Igot the idea, whilst triping on my new tripewriter, that if I carried out your nifty kean suggestions for the rewrite of my BELINDA BEESWAX story, that would drolly enough convert it into a Crime Story, as well as F and SF. Just for the fun of it, then, I couldn't resist sharyimg or even s h a r i n g, my amusement at this droll conceit with Santiago Ap Popkin, the editor over at QUENTIN QUEELEY's MYSTERY MUSEUM. But evidentially I wasn't as clear in my explanations as I should have been. Fingers just ran away with themselves, laughing and giggling over their shoulders (well, knuckles. be pedantic), down the pike. ANYhow, Caligula Fitz-Bumpkin somehow misunderstood. He is not, I mean we must simply Face these things, and Seneca Mac Zipnick is just NOT/ very bright. He, do you know what simpleton did? this will hand yez a real alugh,*Ed:

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Guy sent a check. Thought I was offering the story to him. Boob. A doltish fellowe, Constantine O'Kaplan. But, well, Ed, put yourself in my position. Could I embarass the boy? Bring a blush to those downy cheeks? Nohohohoho.

Well Ed it's just one of those things that we have to face as we go through life: and the fact that QQMM happens to pay four or is it five times what F&SF pays, has got simply nothing to do with it. Avile canard, and that's that.

However, I have not forgotten that advance the time I was in Debtors Prison. And I will, I will, promise you now NOW, I''l sit down at my merry chuckling Selectra Six-Ten, and write you a real sockdaol sok?dolager of a Science Fiction story. VISCIOUS TERRESTRIAL BIPED xxxxxxxxxxxxxxXXXXXXXXXXX ZZZZZZZzzzznnngfhfghhhBZZZ blurtle blep ha ha, well, perhaps not quite along those lines. Zo. So

"Forgiven"?

Thine ever so

Avram

Dear Ed:

Well, you mehk me sheahme, mahn, the way you have forgiven me for that peculiar contretemps anent BELINDA BEESWAX's going to the QUENTIN QUEELEY's MYSTERY MUSEUM people instead. That yuck, Gerardo A Klutskas. Anyway, I have really been sticking to my last, tappetty-tapp. "Tap". ZWWWWEEPPP! Cling. It's a veritable psychodrama of Semi-Outer Space. XXXXXXXXnnnnnggggg llullrp prurp plup ZZZZBBGGGgnn INTELLIGENT NONCHITINOUS BIPED ATTEND ATTEND ATTEND ATTEND haha it's always fun and games with this new Selectra Six-Ten, clicketty-cluch, hmble-hmble-hmble-hmble. Just you should drip by you the mouth,

* or "laugh", as some have it.—Ibid.

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so enclosed is a couple pp of the first darft. draught. drocht Spell it can't, not for sour owl stools, but leave us remember the circumstances under which it grew to maturity. More to be piddled than centered. You like, huh? Huh? Huh . Thass whut I thought. XXXxxZZZZzzzzxxxxngngngn clurkle cluhnkle NOCHITINOUS BIFRU BIFURCATE ATTEND ATTEND ATTEND. Agreat line, hey? Arrests you with its like remorseless sweep, doesn't it? Well well, back to the saline cavern
Love and kisses,
Avram

Dear ED:
See, I knew you would enjoy LOADSTAR EXPRESS. Even the first draft gripped you like ursus somethingorothera, din't it? Yes. True, it was rather rough. Amorphous, as you might say. But I was going to take care of that anyway. Yesyes I had that rough spot, pp 3-to-4 well in mind. I admit that I hsdn't a hadn't exactly planned to do it the way you tentatively suggest. But. Since you do. It would be as well that way as any other. Blush, chuckle. Not exactly what one would formerly have considered for the pp of a family, or even a Family Magazine. Tempura o mores, what? However. WHY N T? XXXXXxxxx====ZZZZZzzzz bgbgbgbngngngn bluggabluggablugga TATATA TA TA AT ATT AT ATTEND ATTEND ATTEND TERRESTRIOUS BIFURCATE NONCHERIDER-MATIC XXXNN FASCIST AGGRESSIVE BIPED goddam Must quit reading alla them student Undrground Wellhung Classified Revolt Papers. To work work WORK toil "With fingers weary and worn, with eyelids heavy and red/ Awoman sat in unwomanly rags, mumbling a crust of bread." Can Laurence Ferlinghetti write lines like that? Can Richard Gumbeiner? It is to laugh. Anon, sir, anon. We Never Forget . Advances advanced to us in our hour od Need, earned eternal

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gratichude. clicketty-clunck.
Industrously, Avram

Dear Edward:
WowWowWOW! WOW-WOW/WOWW'. ! gotcha at alst)) Ignore. Confused by Joy. BUNNYBOY. B U N N Y B O Y, hippetty goddam HOP, B*U*N*N*N*Y*B*O*Y* M*A*G*A*Z*I*N*E*. You got that? Educational & Literary Compendium? With the big tzitzkas? Tha-hats the one. Bunnyboy Magazine has bumped a burse of bold, gumped a gurse of XXXXXXX xHa xHa xHa bgnbgn of gold, dumped a purse of gold in my lap. I kid y ou not. NOT NOT. "Not." He adumbrated hilarriously. EXPLOITIVE DIOXIDIFEROUS BIPEDS ah cummon now, cumMON. Shhest, I hardly know what to say, and this Selectra Six-Ten, elecrtified wit and terror, never but never a case of The DULL LINE LABOURS, AND THE WHEEL TURNS SLOW, goes faster than my MIND, my mind is BLOWN, out through both ears, walls all plastered with brain tissue.
Carriage return. When in doubt. Carstairs Macanley, formerly of Midland Review, to which I sold, years ago—but you don't want to hear about that, anyway he is now and has been for some time past Fiction Editor of Bunnyboy. So whilst making with the clicketty-clack and addressing the MS of LOADSTAR EXPRESS, I H happened to be thinking of him, and just for kicks, you know, Ed,I mean, YOU. Know me. Ed. Just abig, overgrown kid. So just for k.i.c.k.s., I absentmindedly addressed it to him. Laughed like a son of a gun' when I found out what I'd done. And had already stamped the manila! "Well . . ." (I figured) "I'll send it to good old Ed at F&SF soons as Carstairs Macanley returns it. Just to let him see what I'm doing these days. Ed, you have never wished me nothing but good, Ed, from the very first day we met, Ed, and I know that the last thing on your pure, sweet mind, i would be

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that I return the money to Bunyboy, and, besides, I am almost 100% sure it's already in type: and we could hardly expect them to yank it. You're a pro yourself, Ed. But don't think for aminute, Eddy, that I've got abig head and/or have forgotten that advance you so, well, tenderly is really the only— And, Ed, any time you're out on the West Coast, just any time at all, night or day, give me a ring, and we'll go out for dinner somewhere. "A Hot bird and a cold bottle", eh Ed? Hows that b grabg bgrarg XXXxx TREACHEROUS BgN BgN bGN TERCH XXXXXzzZZZ bgn bgn bgn TREACHEROUS AMBULATORY TERRESTRIAL AGGRESSIVE BIPED ATTEND ATTNEDNA Attn bgna bgn cluck. Please excuse my high spirits, my head is just buzzing and clicking right now, Inever SAW such a C*E*C*K* in my L I F E L I F E in my life. Hey, Ed, I could offer to rewrite the story for Bunnyboy leaving out the parts you suggested, but I don't think it would be right to deprive you of the pleasure of seiing them in print. Wait for the story. I"ll do you something else sometime.

Right now I'm going out and buy the biggest can of typewriter cleaning fluid anybody ever saw WE EXSALIVATE ON YOUR PROFFERED BRIBES EXPLOITIVE TERCHEOROSE TERRESTRIAL BIPED AGGRESSIVE NONCHERODERMATOID BIPED LANDING YOUR PLANETARY-RAPING PROBE MODULEWS ON THE SACRED CHITIN OF OUR MOTHER-WORLD FASCISTICLY TERMED "MOOM" XXXZZZZBGN BGN BGN BGN BGN BGN IGNORING OUR JUST LONG-REPRESSED PLEAS FOR YOUR ATTEND ATTE ND ATTEnD OHmigod

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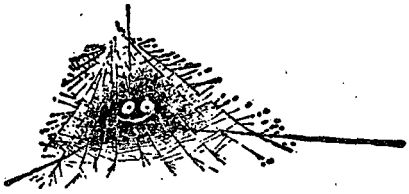
BOOKS



The Dark Corner

The gruesome tales of Howard Phillips Lovecraft revolving around the horrid doings of ancient, evil entities with unpronounceable names have, from the start, inspired a quantity of other authors to try their hands at stories concerning the same ghastly beings, and Arkham House's TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS (edited by August Derleth, $7.50) offers generous evidence that a plenitude are cribbing yet from the perilous pages of Abdul-Alhazred's *Necronomicon*—the fools! Some of the best vintage *Weird Tales* elaborations on Lovecraftian themes are here presented (soft-hearted types such as myself will be pleased to find the Lovecraft-Bloch back and forth in its entirety), and there is a small anthology of brand new stories heretofore unpublished. These last count among them an item by J. Ramsey Campbell which indicates he is taking an interesting new tack with the Cult, an unsuccessful attempt on the part of James Wade to convince me that porpoises (alright, then, dolphins) are anything but lovable, and the latest of Colin Wilson's entries into the realm of Azathoth. It works out to four hundred and seven fun-packed pages. Good reading for both the nostalgic and those determined to keep au courrant in Monster City. Altogether, gang—*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn,* and the last one in is a rotten Tcho-Tcho!

THE FOLSOM FLINT AND OTHER CURIOUS TALES (by David H. Keller, Arkham House, $5.00) is admittedly designed for the completist. It's a memorial volume containing several of the author's better-known stories, a quantity of strictly minor material, and an affectionate and informative essay on Doctor Keller and his work by Paul Spencer. The title piece has the beautiful basic premise of a

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man trying to communicate with a Stone Age skull by means of fitting it out with dentures, blinking light bulbs for eyes, a wig, and a rubber tube attached to a small pump so that the whole caboodle may convincingly smoke cigarettes. Picture *that*, fantasy fans.

I am not knocking Robert E. Howard's Conan, mind, Crom forbid it, but I must admit I have always preferred his dark little Pictish hero, and so am pleased that BRAN MAK MORN (Dell, 60¢) has clawed his way to the newsstands. Frazetta has done a dandy cover protraying Bran coming at you in order to disembowel you, and the book contains *Worms of the Earth,* which is probably the best story Howard ever wrote, which is to say it is a humdinger.

There is living at this moment (unless, God forbid, something happened and I didn't hear about it) one of the very best ghost story writers ever to take pen in hand. He is living and breathing and capable of feeling pain, and he has not had one collection of his work published in our country. Not one. There is an excellent chance you have never even heard the name of the good fellow. It is Robert Aickman, it is, and you should write it on a placard together with a few words of protest and stand before the entrance of your favorite publisher's building with it until he breaks down and brings out an anthology of this superb author's work. I am, as I believe I have indicated in some other of these columns, a man of colossal magnanimity, and genial to a fault, but when my thoughts turn to Aickman's lack of an American publisher, I own that the sound of my grinding teeth is audible through a closed door and that dogs crawl whimpering from my presence. I mean, what do they *want,* for God's sake? Take Aickman's latest collection of the supernatural (SUB ROSA, published 1968 by Victor Gollancz, Ltd., London, England. Figure the price for around $5.00 here as it's 25 shillings on the jacket. Your friendly book dealer knows how to get hold of it, don't let him tell you he doesn't. He's lying if he tells you he doesn't. Show him who's boss; show a little guts). There is stuff in this book as good as Arthur Machen. There is stuff here which is better than Algernon Blackwood, and I speak as one who is very fond of Algernon Blackwood. There is an absolutely terrifying thing which starts out where M. R. James usually left off and then wings on out of sight. There is a political ghost story, believe it or not, ghosts on the grand scale. It is just a dandy of a collection, and if you are among those intelligent fortunates who relish goings on of this kind, I cannot recommend this book too highly. I am sorry you will have to go to some trouble to get hold of it, but

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I absolutely guarantee it's worth it. Perhaps, hopefully, Mr Aickman will soon be published here.† Until then, Buy British.

—GAHAN WILSON

THE MAKING OF KUBRICK'S 2001, Jerome Agel, editor, Signet Film Series, $1.75

Mr. Agel has plowed up a mountain of facts and opinions about 2001 and dumped them into a fat (367 pp.) paperback that contains a lot more than I want to know about Kubrick's beautiful and provocative movie.

There are some interesting things in this book (if you can find them; there is no index, no table of contents), and these include Jeremy Bernstein's *New Yorker* profile of Kubrick, the photos (96 pages of them), and the descriptions of material that was left out of the movie (such as, in a terrifying memo from one consultant, "the splendid words of narration").

Kubrick had the good sense to leave such things out; Mr. Agel has left nothing out of this book. He includes reviews, re-reviews, reviews of the novel, reviews of the music, endless quotes, interviews and lists.

And so we learn that Stanley Kauffmann was bored; that Andrew Sarris "does not like science fiction. I think the people who write science fiction, and a lot of the people who read it, are a little crackers in some ways," and that Lynda Robb wore a white dress to the Washington premiere after seeing Chuck off to war and hearing her father renounce his political career. We're all a little crackers, Andy.

†*He will be. At least one story of Mr. Aickman's will be coming up in a future issue of F&SF. Ed.*

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The subscription coupon on the next page will bring you a free copy of the paperback edition of THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, 13th Series. The book contains more than 250 pages of stories by J. G. Ballard, Jack Vance, Harry Harrison, Richard McKenna, Alfred Bester, Avram Davidson, Zenna Henderson and many others. The coupon is backed by this copy, and removal will not affect the text of the surrounding story.

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SPECIAL WONDER, The Anthony Boucher Memorial Anthology of Fantasy and Science Fiction, J. Francis McComas, editor, Random House, $7.95

Anthony Boucher, co-founder and editor of this magazine for its first nine years, died in April 1968. This book (edited by the other F&SF co-founder, Mick McComas) is dedicated to his memory. Each writer has contributed a story that he believed to be one of Tony's favorites, along with a paragraph or so of affectionate tribute. It's a big, handsome collection (with one unfortunate goof: the last nine paragraphs of Margaret St. Clair's "Brightness Falls From The Air" were omitted), and most of the stories are, quite naturally, reprinted from F&SF.

Among the 29 selections are: R. Bretnor's "The Gnurrs Come from the Voodvork Out," Avram Davidson's "King's Evil," Miriam Allen deFord's "The Apotheosis of Ki," Philip Jose Farmer's "Prometheus," Howard Schoenfeld's "Built Up Logically," and Jack Vance's "Green Magic."

INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES 1969, New England Science Fiction Association, $1.00

This is the latest supplement to the INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES, 1951-1965, a reference book that is invaluable to the collector. The 1951-65 index is available for $8.00; the supplements are $1.00 each from NESFA at Box G, MIT Branch Station, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

—EDWARD L. FERMAN

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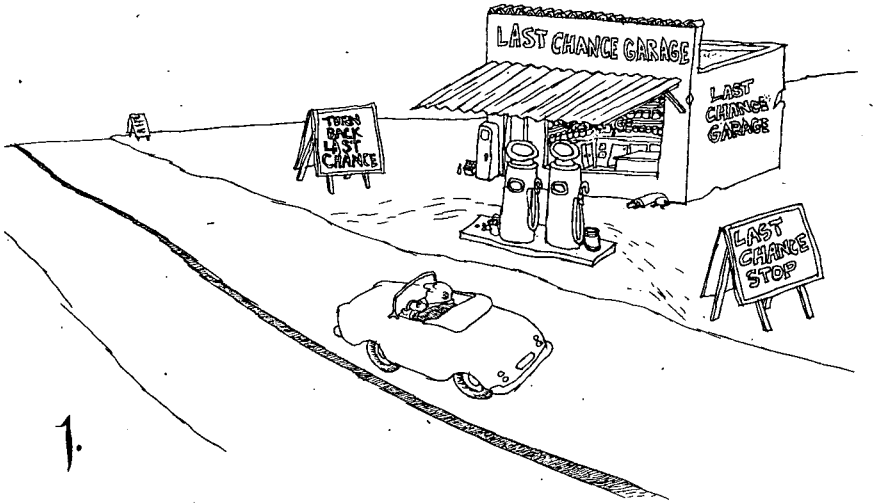

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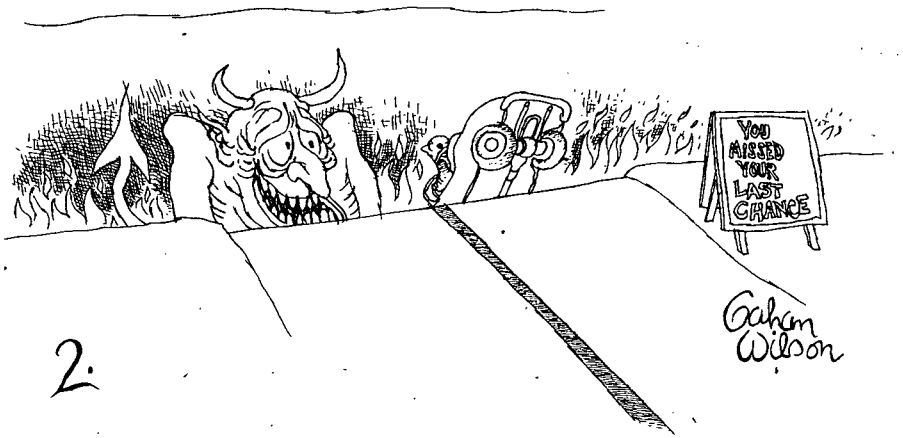

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Here is a stunning story that begins with a painful dialogue between a horseplayer and a tout during the second race at Aqueduct, a track in southern Queens, New York. That is where it begins; you may need a few moments of reflection to decide where it ends.

NOTES JUST PRIOR TO THE FALL

by Barry N. Malzberg

SIMMONS. SIMMONS THE horseplayer. That horseplayer, Simmons. Let us consider him for the moment if we might: he is leaning against the rail at Aqueduct surrounded (he feels) by wheeling birds and doom, clutching a handful of losing pari-mutuel tickets in his left hand. His right hand is occupied with his hair; he is trying ceaselessly to comb it into place, a nervous gesture which caused one of his drinking companions (he has no friends) to call him years ago "Simmons the Dresser," a nickname which, unfortunately, never stuck since his other drinking companions knew his habits too well. It is 1:43 now, some twelve minutes before scheduled post-time for the second race, and Simmons is desperately seeking information from the tote board. He has already lost the first race. The results posted indicate that the horse on which he bet finished third. Simmons did not have the horse to show or across the board. He is a win bettor only, some years ago having read in a handicapping book that only the win bettor has a chance to retain an edge and that place and show were for amateurs and old ladies. He does not know who wrote this book or where it is today, but ever since he read this information he

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has never bet other than to win. He is not sure whether or not this has made much difference but intends to draw up some statistics, sooner or later. He keeps a careful record of his struggles; the fact is that he never totals. (For those who are interested I say that Simmons has lost slightly less than he might have otherwise lost had he bet place and show, but the difference in percentage terms is infinitesimal and the psychological benefits of having more tickets to cash would have well outweighed the minor additional losses.)

Simmons has, then, blown the first race. He has, for that matter, lost seven races in a row, going back to his score on the second race yesterday, a dash for two-year-maiden fillies that produced a seven-length victory for an odds-on favorite. Simmons collected $7.50 for his $5.00 ticket on that one; before then there is also a succession of losing races, although here, perhaps, Simmons loses his sense of precision. He is not exactly sure how many races he has lost recently or how long the losing streak has gone on. All that he can suggest at this moment is that he is deeply into what he has popularly termed a Blue Period and that his situation will have to markedly change for the better shortly or he will be forced to the most serious and investigatory questions about his life and career. Such as, what is he doing here? And what did he hope to gain? And why did he make the famous decision some months ago to have it over and done with the horses once and for all and to make them pay for his psychological investments? And so on. Simmons will phrase these questions to himself in a low, frenetic mumble, somewhere midway between sotto voce and a sustained shriek, and those people in his presence at the time the inquiries begin will look at him peculiarly or not at all, depending upon custom or interest. If he chooses to ask them of himself at the track, he will incite no response at all. There are, after all, so many questioners at the track. The churches—and I know a little bit about this subject—have nothing to compare with the track in the metaphysical area.

"Sons of bitches," Simmons says, but he says this without conviction or hope; it is merely a transitional statement, in the category of throat-clearing or manipulation of the genitals, and means, hence, absolutely nothing. The fact is that Simmons is not clear as to the identity of the sons of bitches, and if he were confronted by them incontrovertibly now or several races in the future, he would not quite know what to say. Manners would overcome reason. "You could have helped me a little with that four horse in the first," he would probably point out mildly, or, "Gee, I

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wish that the kid on my eight horse in yesterday's starter-handicap had tried to stay out of the switches." Overall, an apologetic tone would certainly extrude. The fact is—and it is important that we understand our focus at the outset—that Simmons is both mild and polite, also that he expects little beyond what he has already received and that when he is talking about the sons of bitches . . . well, it would be naive and simplistic to say that he refers mainly to himself; but as one who is extremely close to the situation, I can suggest that part of this is valid. (Part of it is not. Everything is irretrievably complex. This must be kept carefully in mind. The distance between a winning and tail-end horse in a field, any kind of field, is at the most ten seconds. Ten seconds upon which rests the ascription of all hope and, in certain cases, human lives. One must be respectful of any institution which can so carefully narrow the gap between intimation and disaster.)

"Sons of bitches," Simmons says again and opens the copy of the *Morning Telegraph* which he is holding to full arm's length and begins to look, with neither anticipation nor intensity, at the experts' selections for the second race. Because this is both a Tuesday and cloudy, Simmons is able to perform this gesture, articulate his feelings in isolation and quiet. There is no one within several yards of him in any direction, and Simmons, in addition, having long staked out exactly this spot at the upper stretch, feels that he can conduct himself here exactly as he would in his own home. The fact is, although he would find it painful to admit this, that Simmons despises company for private reasons and is able to find his fullest sense of identity at the racetrack precisely because it both heightens and renders somehow sinister his sense of isolation. He knows that he would never be able to get away with his rhetoric in a social or subway situation, and he would not dare to do it at home because he has long been conditioned to the belief—alas—that any man who talks sprightly to himself in his own quarters is probably insane.

"Ah, God, there's no percentage," Simmons now mutters, a favorite expression, as he looks at the selection pages of the *Telegraph*. As always, this ominous newspaper renders him little comfort, since its selectors, like all selectors everywhere, are oriented toward favorites or logical choices and tell him only what a sane, conservative advisor (Simmons envisions him as a portly, rather puffy man who inhabits the clubhouse, has a mild cardiac condition, and calls all trainers "Willie") would offer if this advisor were, for some reason, to take

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an interest in Simmons and his plight and attempt to turn the situation around. Simmons, who once wanted exactly such a friend, now hates the specter of the Advisor, feels that the Advisor—like Clocker Lawton, Clocker Rowe and Clocker Powell—simultaneously embodies and parodies everything about successful followers of racing that he has come to hate and feels that he might as well kill him on sight. He has, therefore, transferred his revulsion to the selector pages, which he now turns away from with a moan. He goes instead to the past performances which he regards with a glazed and horrified expression as he comes slowly to realize that he has seen them all before, most of the night in fact, and that he knows less about differentiating the horses than he did at the beginning.

For the first time this afternoon, it occurs to Simmons that he might be losing his mind. Meanwhile, the bugler walks to the front of the paddock a hundred yards down the track and blows that call to indicate that the jockeys are to mount their horses. It is almost time for the field in the second race to come out.

Simmons has lost twenty dollars on the first race. He has lost two hundred and sixty dollars during his most recent losing streak. He has lost fifteen hundred and eighty dollars and forty cents (plus expenses) since he made his Career Decision some three months and sixteen days ago. I offer these statistics without prejudice, and only because, unlike Simmons, I am in a position to amass them, reconcile them with a larger scheme of possibilities, and see them in what might be tastefully called a metaphysical perspective. They cause me neither pain nor pleasure to recite: fifteen hundred, eighty dollars and forty cents is, after all, less than the total war budget for some sixtieths of a second, and can be considered in a relativistic sense (by which I do not strictly abide) to be an insubstantial amount. Simmons, on the other hand, confronted by these figures, would be unable to speak them distinctly. It all depends, as you see, although I am not saying that my position is necessarily superior to that of Simmons. Unlike him, I take no emotions from event, this being, I am led to understand by the philosophy I have studied, a serious defect. I hold my own judgment in abeyance; certainly, over the past few months, Simmons has taught me a great deal.

Now he sighs, mutters, stretches, curses. He wishes, of course, to make a bet on the second race (he always bets on every race, being unable to cope with the fear that he would otherwise know of missing out on the Ultimate Coup) but has no firm

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choice, cannot, pity him, arrive at that careful, judicious balance of speed, windage, condition, manipulation, desire, weight, and intrinsic class which is the key to approaching the variables of even the cheapest claiming sprint. Or, as he would put it, he cannot seem to find an angle. It is at this moment, therefore, that I decide to make my entrance, seeing little enough profit in delay and realizing that the Simmons who needs my help at 1:46 may have a definite superiority over the Simmons who could reject it at 3:10. For the fact is that I see already the pattern of the afternoon, and it is not pleasant. (Which is not to say that it is unmanageable. Only Simmons would think that the unpleasant is necessarily disastrous.)

"Look," I say without introduction. "Do you want a play in this race? Because I think I can give you something interesting."

"Oh, boy," Simmons says, looking up and then rapidly down toward his newspaper. (I should point out that this is not the first time I have approached him so abruptly.) "Oh, God, it isn't you again, is it?" Simmons's initial resistance toward my appearance has been somewhat blunted, but the fact remains that he finds me almost unacceptable. While his hold on sanity (I can attest) has never been in the least precarious, Simmons thinks that it is and that I am a manifestation of his breakdown. I have made progress in this area but not quite enough, and now, of course, there is not enough time. "I just don't want to listen," he says and covers his ears. Perhaps he is thinking of blinkers. "I don't want to hear any more of it. Losing is one thing, but this is another."

"Nonsense," I say and then address him with enormous tact and personal force. The covering of the ears means nothing. "We don't have time for overlong discussions and besides that I must warn you that unless you take some good advice quickly you will be verging on a truly massive disaster, one with overtones of violence and a sense of intrinsic loss more acute than any you have ever known. I am afraid that I must get to the simple gist of this. Bet the seven horse, win and place."

"Oh, God," Simmons says again, but obediently—there is an enormous and satisfying submission to all horseplayers because the fact is that they need to be told exactly what to do—he opens the newspaper to the past performances and looks at the horse in question. "Salem? The number seven horse, Salem?"

"That's the one," I say and let my finger join his against the newsprint. The faint impression of the type slides against skin with an almost erotic smoothness. I can understand what is erroneously called the power of the printed

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word. "Win and place. Place and win." I try to speak distinctly. My time, after all, is not unlimited.

"But that's ridiculous," Simmons says. "This horse is already thirty-five to one on the board. He's the only maiden in the race, he hasn't shown anything since February at Tropical, and that was in a claimer two thousand dollars cheaper than this one. The jockey is a bad apprentice, the trainer is a known stiff, and the weight is the heaviest in the race. I don't see it. I just don't see it." It is well known that with such rationalizations about his marriage, Simmons walked out of his home four years ago and never returned. For this reason and others, I do not take his rationalizations seriously.

"Reason enough," I say. "He doesn't figure. That's the point I am trying to develop. It wouldn't be a good tip if it were logical, would it?"

At this moment, the bugler blows the second call and our conversation is halted. We stand in almost companionable quiet then while the announcement is made (I have always been suspicious of the involvement of the track announcer in the events he is describing, but that is another issue altogether), and the horses come onto the track, some of them with a curious skipping gait which indicates incipient lameness, others with a somnolent prance which might indicate either good spirits or the presence of undetectable drugs. The seven horse, a brown six-year-old gelding, moves somewhat ahead of the field and comes toward us, turns at a point in front of our section of the rail, and then, with some encouragement from outrider and jockey, both of whom are singing, breaks into a sidewise gallop which quickly carries him past the finish line and out of sight along the backstretch. The other horses follow less eagerly and at a cautious distance.

"Front bandages," Simmons says, "Front *and* rear. And he seemed a little rank, too. I don't know. I just don't know. Look, look, he's fifty to one." In his rising excitement—this is, to be sure, the very first tip I have given him, although on previous occasions I have sometimes gone so far as to offer advanced-handicapping advice—his hostility has vanished and his very disbelief seems to wave like a sheet between us punched with enough holes for random communication. "Ah, it's crazy, it's crazy," he says. "I mean, I'm willing to listen to anyone, but I just don't see it. Fifty to one, though." The tote board winks. "*Sixty* to one. Do you think?"

"I do not think," I say. "By the way, I can't stay any longer," and add something about probability currents and cross-angles of time which Simmons is expected to

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find obscure and to ignore. I leave him rapidly and in such a state of elemental self-absorption that I know he will hardly detect my absence and then only with an abstracted glare. For the fact is that I have put Simmons on to something.

I know that: I see all of the signs. As the horses gather in the upper stretch to talk things over a bit before getting into the dreaded starting gate (I am also privy to the emotions of horses, limited creatures but none the less poignant, at least to themselves), Simmons turns and begins to move at his own sidewise canter toward the pari-mutuel windows. Gasping slightly in my hurry to keep up—I am in rather poor physical condition as a result of my contemplative existence—I follow him, managing to join him only at the window itself, where Simmons joins a short line of ragged men, most of them pallid, who shuffle their feet and clutch their wallets while their twins ahead pass the window and scurry by, looking at the tickets they have bought with wonder. It is the ten-dollar win window, an excellent sign, because Simmons does almost all of his business at the two- and five-dollar slots. He does this, as he once explained to me, not because he wagers little but because he simply feels more comfortable at these more modest windows. Perhaps it is a question of his heritage or only the class system at work. In any event it is a fact—and I have witnessed this—that once Simmons bet fifty dollars on a horse to win and did so at the two dollar window in the form of twenty-five tickets. He simply feels more in place there, the clerk's glare to the contrary. In that case, incidentally, the horse won, profiting Simmons fifty-five dollars, something which he considered an excellent omen as well as a sign that his humility had been observed and respected in Higher Quarters. Nevertheless, he is now on the ten-dollar line.

"Got anything?" the man behind him asks. He does so in response to a certain stimulus which I have implanted midway between the medulla oblongata and the vas deferens, since I am curious about the confidentiality which Simmons feels in our relationship. But I have not been cautious technically, and there is a terrifying moment during which I fear the questioner might faint. Fortunately he does not, but the reasons he has worked out for betting his selection are now and will be irrevocably wiped from his mind.

"Nothing," Simmons mutters. "Oh, all right, the six, the six," he adds, "just got a tip out of the infield, but I don't know if it's worth a damn. I'll stab, though." For an instant, I feel a jolt of horror. Has Simmons misunderstood me? Or already forgotten the ad-

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vice? But then as he comes to the window, I understand that he is only being what he takes to be very cunning, and as he leans over, he makes the clerk lip-read the word *seven.* He has decided then to posture as a deaf-mute in order to protect his information, and this is safe since no ten-dollar clerk at this track has ever before seen him. As he now mouthes *seven ten times,* the clerk returns that timeless, embracing nod of one who has seen everything—this look is also available in whore houses but then only on reservation and for special customers—and punches out ten tickets. Simmons, the new deaf-mute, puts down a hundred-dollar bill (leaving him with only a few dollars and change) and takes the tickets, cupping them so that the man behind can only see his fine backhand, and then moves to the rear of the line. Pausing there, he verifies the number (something he always does, although his losing streak has now reached such proportions that when races are over he finds himself reaching for his tickets and praying that the clerk has made a mistake or that he, Simmons, has begun to lose his vision and did not verify properly) and then returns slowly toward his place on the rail, pausing for a brief cup of coffee, which he does not taste, although he can distinctly hear the clerk cursing him for not leaving the change from a quarter. I understand with disgust that Simmons will not visit the place windows, preferring to back up his bet with insistence rather than circumspection. It is an old failing.

He then goes on to his place on the rail, slightly more crowded now with only two minutes to post, but sufficiently uninhabited at the edges that he is able, without difficulty, to cleave out the yardage which he feels he needs as he prepares himself for the running. As he curls his hair, wipes his forehead (it is a cool day), runs a left hand absently over his genitals (his inner wrist catching the comforting bulge of the tickets in his trouser pocket), he begins a thin, shrieking monologue which he believes to be private although, of course, I am privy to every word. I listen to it with relish, delighted as always to see that my effects upon Simmons have not been imperceptible and that now, as in the past, I have the capacity to move him. Of course I have had to change many of my devices and manipulations in order to do so, but I have never lost that path of connection, and it is this, along with a few other things, that gives me hope. If I have not lost Simmons, then there is absolutely no saying what I might not someday gain, and in the bargain I have been able to keep abreast of his development. This is no mean accomplishment since Simmons has

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been even more variable within the last couple of years than in the past.

"Oh, you bastards," Simmons is saying, "oh, you bastards, *please,* please give me this one; it's so little to ask, so little to ask. A hundred dollars, seventy-one now, that's seven thousand, seven thousand dollars, what's the difference? Who cares? What difference would it make? Favorites can win, longshots lose, longshots win, favorites lose, everyone gets out sooner or later. Oh, God, give me just this one and never again. The seven, the seven, just once the seven, what difference does it make to you, you dirty sons of bitches? But think of the difference it makes to *me;* a new chance, a new life, well, maybe the old life but certainly a lot better, a *lot* better, I deserve it. Oh, give this one to me now. *Eighty* to one now, oh, God, eight thousand dollars, maybe more, never less. Oh, please, please, it won't cost you a thing but think of what it means to me."

(There are two aspects to this monologue which I find objectionable. The first is that the main thrust of Simmons's appeal is to the sons of bitches rather than to the one who gave him the tip—that is to say me—and the second is that Simmons knows as well as I that were he to win eight thousand dollars, he would have no more idea of what to do with it than as to what to do with the hundred he has just bet. It is various and peculiar, peculiar and various, as they say, but it is the very *perversity* of Simmons and, by inference, humanity itself, which has always so involved me and, yes, made them lovable in my eyes. Who, other than themselves, would have ever conceived them?)

In any event, Simmons is now barely coherent. "Oh, I picked him, for God's sake, let me know that I still have my wits about me!" he moans and this, as everything else, I find amusing . . . it is not the fact that my tip has so rapidly been transmuted into judgment that titillates me. No, it is something else; it has to do with the certainy of Simmons's conviction that, large or largest, massive things now work in the balance. This is an emotion only fully apprehensible at the racetrack, although other situations occasionally come close. None of those situations are, however, at all accessible to what Simmons or I would think of as the "working class."

It is now post-time. Post-time. It is, in fact, some seconds after post-time, one of the horses in the gate having clearly, to Simmons's anguished but far-sighted gaze, unseated his jockey. "Oh, God, not the seven, not the number seven," Simmons says, and the announcer says, "That's number one, Cinnamon Roll, unseating the rider,"

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and Simmons gives a gasp of relief as the announcer adds, "that's Cinnamon Roll now running off from the gate." "Oh, boy," he says again (actually the acoustics are quite poor, and for an instant he had thought that the announcer was talking about *Simmons* unseating his jockey and not the crazed horse) as several patrons to his right and left begin to spew curses, at the same time extracting tickets which they regard with loathing. Cinnamon Roll is the 7-5 favorite, as one glance at the tote quickly affirms. "I really can't stand this," Simmons says to no one in particular and bangs an elbow into the mesh, giving him enough distracting pain to keep him functioning while the outriders meanwhile recover number one, gently urge her toward the gate, stand guard while the jockey remounts, and then tenderly pat the horse into position. The grandstand mutters angrily. The horse is the favorite and they feel (*they* is a generalization, but I can do a great deal of research very quickly) that it should have been scratched for medical reasons. But Simmons himself is beyond judgments; he has moved into an abyss of feeling so profound that only the announcer's statement that the horses are out of the gate is able to move him to passion.

The effect of this is, however, galvanic and would surprise anyone in the vicinity of the ten-dollar window who had decided to take a tip from the mute. "Oh, you bastards, here you come!" he says with conviction, a sidewise glance at the board now informing him that the horse is at least ninety to one. "Oh, boy," he says, "come on, come on, get me out of this, come *on,* please," his voice winding its way from a low rumble to a whining shriek during the final words and impressing me, as it always has, with Simmons's utter lack of obscenity under stress situations. It all falls away in the same fashion, I understand, that soldiers in mortal danger of their lives or with broken morale, are apt to curse somewhat less than a cross-section of the Mothers Superior. Obscenity, according to those studies with which I am familiar, occurs only during the relative contentment of hope and tends to vanish when the stresses become evident. "Oh, please," says Simmons and clasps his hands prettily. "Oh, please."

(Once Simmons had made a resolve not to address horses or jockeys during the running of races. He came to this decision on the basis that he was trying to be businesslike and participating in an investment program not dissimilar to stocks and bonds. Did brokers or customers, he wondered, scream curses at the ticker and shake their fists when old IBM went up two in the middle of the track? Of course they did not, and

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he made no fewer demands of himself than he would if he had been in a more favored position. This resolve had lasted four races, until Cruguet had done something really disastrous with a longshot who was caused to bear in on the rail, and from that time on Simmons has comforted himself with the belief that without air-conditioning, all brokers would work in their undershirts.)

The horses come toward the stretch turn. It is difficult to pick up the call in the midst of the shouting and difficult as well to see the numbers of the leading horses as flashed on the tote board because of the angle. It is for this very reason—a sense of rising mystery during a race, all possibilities enacted until the deadly, final knowledge—that Simmons has elected this for his vantage point, but now, past all shrieking, his voice is only a terrified whisper as he says, "What's going on? What's going on?" Hurling himself half over the rail, he is able to see the race for the first time; he cannot spot the seven horse. Four is on the lead and two outside of it is coming on. The seven must be behind another horse on the rail; either that or it has adjourned from the gate because, as the horses pass, he is unable to see it. "Please," Simmons says as he watches the field scuttle from him, "oh, please." There are diminishing shrieks in the distance and then a silence so deep and white that it could be laid over acres of glowing bone.

Numbers come up on the tote which Simmons is unable to see. After a time—and it is a considerable time, for first all of the horses must return to the paddock to be unsaddled and the jockeys to weigh in, but for Simmons there is no sense of chronology whatsoever—the announcer says that the race is official and reads off the money horses.

The seven finishes third, which is, in my estimation and possibly the announcer's, a remarkable showing for a ninety-to-one shot. Only one ninety-to-one shot out of ten beats even a third of its field; this one has beaten fully three-quarters. I point this out to Simmons in a mild, apologetic tone. "It was rather remarkable, you've got to admit that," I say. "And you could have had the show bet, which incidentally paid only eight sixty due to the two favorites running in."

Simmons says nothing. He is beyond modest mathematical remonstrances or calculation. Instead he is shaking his head, up and down alternately, his neck constricting, his ears bulging, his eyes fluttering. He appears to be entering a period of sea change, or, at any rate, it seems to be Simmons Transmuted which I see before me, an older, wiser, infinitely altered Simmons who looks at me

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with compassion and loathing intermingled as, palms spread before me, I back away, apologizing for my faulty information, my old impulsiveness, my overextended and familiar desire to please. My suspicion is that I too have become a compulsive gambler.

But after a long time, Simmons does say something. He says it in a low voice, and it is difficult for me to distinguish it for a moment. Then, the words seem to explode through me with the force of a grenade, or perhaps I am thinking of a waterfall, my taste for metaphor being as faulty as my way with horses. Nevertheless, I find that I am drenched in knowledge, swaying, gasping, so moved that I am virtually inarticulate, and the silence deepens further as we plunge into the True and Final Disaster and the epochal and grim events of the deservedly famous Last Descent truly begin.

"You can't win 'em all," Simmons says.

ABOUT THE COVER: From a planet with a very thin atmosphere 400,000 light years out in space, we are looking at our galaxy, the Milky Way. It is 100,000 light years in diameter and its plane is inclined 30° to the line of sight (the left side being the near side). The position of our sun is indicated by a star above the greenish nucleus about two-thirds out from the center. The patches of light are star clouds; individual stars would not show as resolved. The dark patches are cosmic dust. The arms have been located by radio astronomy.

To the right of our Galaxy is M 31, another galaxy, part of the constellation of Andromeda, about 2,200,000 light years distant from our sun and roughly the size and shape of our galaxy. Just above our galaxy is the galaxy M 33, in the constellation of Triangulum, which is somewhat smaller than Andromeda and also about 2,200,000 light years distant from our sun. On the upper left is the Large Magellanic Cloud, an irregular galaxy about 165,000 light years from our sun; below it is the Small Magellanic Cloud, about 185,000 light years distant from us.

The few stars visible are wanderers, which have escaped from galaxies and are drifting through space, and our hypothetical planet from which the picture is taken is presumably orbiting one of these.

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The Old Bunch had collected enough money to provide a decent burial for Dusty Stiggins, and it seemed just a bit ungrateful for him to turn up five months after his own funeral . . .

THE OLD BUNCH AND DUSTY STIGGINS

by Miriam Allen deFord

When Dusty Stiggins collapsed on the floor of Lou's Bar and was pronounced DOA at the Emergency Hospital, all of the Old Bunch had been there, of course. They always were. All except Dusty himself; he used to disappear for a while, but he always came back again.

So far as they could find out, he had no living relatives. Oscar Hake went around to the room he had rented for six years past, and the landlady let him in, and he searched thoroughly, but there wasn't a scrap of paper that gave any clue. She didn't know anything, either, except that he was quiet and that he always paid the rent on time, even for the periods when he was away somewhere.

So of course it was up to them. The Old Bunch always stuck together. They passed the hat around, even among other bar patrons who maybe knew Dusty only by sight or not at all, and they collected enough; Lou himself, as was to be expected, gave the most. The rest of them were all retired. Gus Durrendoerfer and Ben Wimbley had pensions, and had saved enough for their own funerals; Oscar Hake had a life insurance policy; and Chris McCaskey had a son who would see to it. They never discussed the subject, but none of them had to worry. Dusty was one of the Old Bunch, and that was that.

They did it all properly, if economically. There was an organist,

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and there was a wreath, and there was a preacher, suggested by the mortician (to whom he probably paid a commission). They couldn't manage much of a cemetery lot, or perpetual care, but Dusty would be long gone before the lease ran out, and once in a while on a Sunday one of them would go out there and do some weeding and maybe leave a bunch of flowers on the grave.

After two or three months they stopped talking about him, or thinking about him very often. They were used to missing him for a month or two once or twice a year, and there wasn't so much to say. Ben Wimbley remembered best how he had wandered in one rainy afternoon and they had got to talking, and he kept coming in and gradually he became one of the Bunch. "Henry Stiggins is the name," he told them, but they got to calling him Dusty because that's the way he always looked. He never said where he came from, or anything else about his past, just nursed his beer and talked about this, that, and the other thing the way they all did. If anyone in the Bunch wanted to volunteer information about himself, OK, they'd listen, but nobody ever asked questions.

So it was a terrible shock when, on another rainy afternoon about five months after the funeral, with nobody in the bar but Lou and the Old Bunch, the door opened and in walked Dusty Stiggins.

Ben Wimbley let out a screech. Chris McCaskey crossed himself. Oscar Hake, whose heart wasn't too good, had to stagger to one of the tables and fall into a chair. Only big Gus Durrendoerfer was able to use his voice. Lou just stood and stared.

"What the—you're dead!" Gus told him. Dust just smiled.

He wasn't a ghost. He was solid. He wore the suit they'd buried him in. Lou's stare fixed on a mirror on the back wall, opposite the one behind the bar. But they could all see him in the bar mirror, and he showed in it just as they did.

He looked kind of grey and powdery, but then he always did have that kind of look. He put out his hand and grabbed Gus's, and it was a real flesh-and-bone hand.

"Thanks for the rest, boys," he said. "It was a good one. How much did it set you back?"

Oscar Hake, who'd handled the fund, said in a voice like an automatic machine, "Four hundred and thirty-two dollars." He was leaning back in the chair and breathing hard.

"And seventy-six cents," added Gus, who had been a bookkeeper before he retired.

"$432.76. I'll pay you back as soon as I can get hold of it. Who'll I give it to?"

"Oscar," said Gus. His voice was hoarse. Dusty nodded.

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"A beer, Dusty?" Lou croaked. His eyes were still fixed on the back mirror.

"Not right now, Lou. I'll be seeing you." He moved in a funny sidewise motion to the door, opened it, and went out. Nobody spoke.

Lou pulled himself together. "Drink up," he said. "This round's on the house."

"Make mine whiskey, Lou," Oscar gasped. Gus carried it over to him at the table.

"You're the one always shooting off your mouth about how there's no soul and no immortality," Chris McCaskey burst out suddenly. "How about it, Gus?"

Gus cleared his throat. "You know what I think?" he said. "I think that wasn't Dusty at all. I think he's got a twin brother somewheres—an identical twin—who just found out Dusty was dead and thought it would be funny to come in here and make fools of us.

"Maybe he *will* pay the money back," he added hopefully.

"How would he know this is where Dusty hung out?" Oscar wanted to know. "How would he know our names?" But his color was coming back, and there was a distinct lift in the atmosphere.

Lou spoiled that.

"I was the only one facing him," he said. "The only one who could see him in that mirror over there.

"The back of his coat was split all the way down."

Oh, they did what they could. Oscar interviewed the landlady again—of course not telling her what had happened, just asking if anyone had inquired since about Dusty. She said no, his clothes and things were in a carton in her garage, and the room was rented. Ben Wimbley went to the cemetery and took a look at the grave. It was just the way they'd left it, except that the flowers were faded, and he threw them out. The money hadn't run to a headstone; there was just a wooden tag with a number. They'd been talking about ponying up for a plain stone. But not now.

For a while they started nervously every time the bar door opened. Oscar Hake even stayed away for two days, something that never had been known before. Chris McCaskey went around to his room in a cheap hotel, and he said he'd been to the General Hospital for a check-up on his heart. But he came back again, and nursed his beer all afternoon just like the rest of them. They never did come in after dinner; there were too many strangers then, and none of them was up to late hours any more.

So Lou was the only one who knew him who was there when Dusty Stiggins came in again.

It was almost closing time and he was busy serving last drinks.

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The bar was pretty crowded; it was a Friday night with a weekend ahead. He hardly noticed at first when a man pushed his way in between two stools and leaned forward, almost touching him. For a second he thought it was an obstreperous drunk who would have to be disposed of, for another second, that he was going to be held up. Then he saw who it was.

Dusty had different clothes on this time. The way funny things run through your head in a crisis, Lou wondered if he'd had to buy new ones or if he'd got his stuff somehow from the landlady's garage. He looked better than the other time, but he still looked dusty.

"Here," he said in a low voice, "give this to Oscar. I might not be around again."

He thrust a little cloth bag into Lou's hand, smiled, raised his right hand in a salute, and walked out.

Fortunately the place was emptying fast, and Lou managed to hold on until he'd got the last one out and locked the door. Then he took a double shot, straight, and let himself down on a stool. He was shaking all over.

He opened the bag and there it was—$432.76 in currency and coin, and a scrap of paper on which was written, "Give this to the boys and tell them thanks again."

"But good Lord," Ben Wimbley said the next day when Lou told them about it, "grant he could have got out of there—but how?—and grant he could fix the grave up again. But you know and I know, they embalm people before they bury them. I had a cousin once started to be an undertaker—he got the whoops about it and never finished the training—but he told me how they drain out the fluids and whatever and inject embalming fluid instead. And embalming fluid has a lot of formaldehyde in it, and that's poison."

"Yeah," Gus Durrendoerfer added, "and besides all that, where would old Dusty ever get that much money? He never seemed to have more than enough to live on, all these years."

"Do you think," Chris McCaskey asked hesitantly, "maybe it's just somebody *impersonating* him?"

"Rats," Oscar Hake objected. "That sounds like one of them Gothic novels, they call them. Why *should* anybody, for heaven's sake—$432 worth?"

"And 76 cents," Lou chimed in. "And what's more, it *was* Dusty, both times. Nobody could fake that queer voice of his."

That was one reason he'd got the nickname; even his voice sounded as if he were breathing dust.

Gus shook his bald head. "It's like a bad dream," he said. "It

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couldn't happen, and yet it did. I wonder where he is now?"

"Wherever he is, and whatever he is, I have a hunch we won't see him here again," said Lou. "Drink up, boys; it's on me again."

Around three o'clock that morning, the thing that called itself Henry Stiggins had got back to the cemetery. He made the neat accustomed incision and climbed in wearily. It was an accident he regretted, having the collapse come upon him suddenly like that, in public; usually he knew in advance and could be near his current grave. Embalming fluid would substitute for blood for just so long, and perhaps with the years his resistance was growing weaker.

Still, this was a nice grave and it had been good of the Old Bunch to give him such a fine send-off. He knew very well they couldn't really afford it; that's why he'd made up his mind to repay them. It had taken five muggings and a murder to raise enough for that. But now it was done and he could have a good long rest again before he made tracks for another town, under another name.

Even a ghoul has his moments of friendliness and gratitude.

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Piers Anthony, author of the contest-winning novel SOS THE ROPE *(July-Sept. 1968), returns with an off-beat story about a different kind of contest, an extraterrestrial wood-splitting tournament.*

WOOD YOU?

by Piers Anthony

BUDDY WAS AN ONLY CHILD IN A family of eight. Specifically, he had five adult sisters ranging in age from the neighborhood of ten to the neighborhood of sixteen, the least of these more bossy than it was possible to be. In the distance beyond these were one or two harried parents, almost always away at work or home asleep, and of these only Dad was male. It was not a bearable situation for a young man, and Buddy kept to himself as much as possible.

When he was two he found a long, sharp kitchen knife under the sink, and brought it proudly into sight. There was an extraordinarily unpleasant fuss. So that diversion was a complete washout.

When he was two and a half he uncovered a broken rusty jackknife in the dirt under the back step. Since he was not stupid, he kept it out of sight. When unobserved—and this was much of the time, for the adult sisters had numerous and trivial concerns of their own—he studied it at leisure. The blade did not taste good, but it was fine for digging, and gradually the pitted, brownish surface became more shiny.

Behind the house a fair distance was a tremendous chopping block, where Dad periodically wielded a massive axe in an effort to reduce unruly chunks of wood

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to fireplace kindling. Chips and bark were all around, and the ground was scuffled intriguingly. It was a fascinating region, and he liked the smell and feel of the wood, and the fat cockroaches that scuttled under the bark. Because he knew from observation that this was Man's work, he took his knife there and commenced his private apprenticeship as a Split.

At first he cut himself, but had the presence of mind to hide the knife before the distaff commotion centered on him. The second time it happened he managed not to scream, and after a while the blood got sticky and hard. Judiciously applied dirt concealed the wound, and it didn't hurt any more. Soon he found out how to avoid such mishaps by bracing the blade away from his hand. He became adept at carving kindling.

When he was three he was able to render a given wood chip into sections hardly thicker than matchsticks. It was a matter of following the grain and being careful.

Then he came across a battered, gap-toothed hatchet in the garage. This was a splendid find, though it was horrendous to swing. Once he mastered this he was able to split larger sections of wood and do it with real dispatch. Here the lie of the grain was even more important, for if he struck a piece incorrectly, the hatchet could bounce back and fly out of his grasping little fingers. He also discovered that some chunks were harder than others, and some sappier, and others twistier. For each type he evolved a special technique.

At three and a half, Buddy discovered that he could split even the largest logs by hammering in a wedge-like scrap of metal until the wood strained and sundered. But his wedge was brittle and bent, and the hammer he used had a loose handle, so he had to be very careful. Not only did he have to study the grain, he had to analyze the general configuration of the segment, discover any natural cracks, and determine the general type of wood. There was quite a difference between soft, straight pine and hard, curved yellow birch! He also had to work around the knots, and sometimes to flake off outside sections along the circular growth-rings. But one way or another he could, in time, split any piece at all.

In fact, he was an expert woodsplitter by the time he achieved the independent age of four. His adult sisters had long since given up and let him play with his tools, for he could put up a respectable battle when balked. They had no comprehension of the intricacies of woodcraft and were forever and unreasonably scornful of what they called his tall stories about grains and types. "He's out of bounds!" they exclaimed, not knowing that all boys his age were

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out of bounds, but few were as specialized as Buddy.

One day a free-lance field agent for the Snurptegian Confederation happened by, attracted by the measured tapping of loose-handled hammer on brittle, bent wedge. The creature ascertained that no adults were present (for they tended to be narrow-minded about extraterrestrials), approached the scene of activity, and waited politely while Buddy completed his incision. A final series of blows, a judicious poke with the jackknife, and the piece fell cleanly cloven.

—Bravo! the Snurp agent exclaimed. —A masterful job.

Buddy was taken aback. He hadn't noticed the visitor, and no one had ever complimented him on his talent before. "Gee," he said shyly.

—One is truly skilled at the art, the Snurp said. —What might one do with superior equipment?

Buddy looked at it. The Snurp had bug ears and worm eyes and slug feet, but was otherwise rather strange. Buddy did not understand all the words, but he liked the tone.

—How would one like to compete in the regional wood-splitting junior championship tournament?

Buddy didn't know what "compete" meant, or "regional," and the last three words were beyond human assimilation, but he certainly grasped the important part: "wood splitting." "Is that good?" he asked, knowing that it was.

—Very good, the alien said. —All one has to do is split wood fast and well. There are prizes for the best.

"Is that fun?"

—Much fun, especially for the winners.

Buddy knew his sisters would object, so he agreed to go with the Snurp. He was about to take his hatchet and hammer and chisel and penknife along, but the alien said —One must employ standard equipment.

He followed the glistening trail of the Snurp to a structure resembling a giant washing machine. They climbed in. Actually, the Snurp didn't climb so much as slide uphill. The lid settled down, warm bubbly fluid flowed in to surround them, and the thing went into a violent spin cycle.

Buddy was frightened, for he had never been inside a washing machine before when it was running. But the Snurp reassured him: —One must endure transspace only momentarily.

Sure enough, the spinning stopped and he wasn't even dizzy. The wash water drained, leaving him comfortably dry (he'd have to tell Mom about that!), and the lid lifted. They climbed/slid out.

The sunlight was green and the bushes were transparent, but aside from that the scenery was unusual. Buddy ignored it.

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—One is just in time, the Snurp said. —Familiarize oneself with the equipment while one's agent attends to the registration.

Buddy paid no attention to the incomprehensible sentence. He went directly to the nearest chopping block. It was a marvel: great and square, with pockets in the sides for wonderful splitting tools. There was an elegant axe, a hatchet, a maul, six graduated wedges—all smooth and new and brightly colored. The top of the block was sturdy and flat, without even any chop marks or splinters. Of course the axe and maul were too big and heavy for him to manage, but it was nice having them there to look at.

**Contestants! a voice proclaimed, and Buddy looked up to find a metal eyeball poised above his block. **Assume your stance.

The Snurp reappeared. —Here is a smaller maul for one. Will this suffice?

"Can I use your hammer?" Buddy asked eagerly. "That's just right!"

The Snurp gave him the small maul. —Excellent. Now one must stand by the block, as the others are doing. Commence attack the moment the initial sample appears.

"Can I have some wood to split?"

**First phase, the eyeball said. **Purple Ash, bias facet. Proceed.

A chunk of wood appeared on the block, startling Buddy. But he saw that the same thing had happened on every block, and the bird-like and lizard-like and crab-like aliens were hefting their tools. It was time to split!

The chunk was beautiful: deep blue-red with burnished black grain-ridges that angled through it strangely. It was like no wood he had ever seen, and certainly not like Earthly white ash. But it could be split! His feel for the difficult grain assured him of that.

He pondered, then placed the smallest wedge at a critical nexus, and tapped it in three times, just so. He did not dare hit too hard, here, for that would foul the interior cleavage. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew. And of course he had had long experience with difficult wood. Then he placed the next larger wedge against the appropriate stress point and struck it four times, harder.

On the last blow the log fell open, neatly halved.

—Time! the Snurp cried.

The metal eyeball appeared again and winked open. Buddy saw no support for it; it was just hanging in midair. **Approved, it said, and disappeared.

—Excellent! One has superseded Phase One with credit to spare! the Snurp exulted.

The split pieces vanished. Buddy looked around, having nothing better to do. This was

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fun, but he was beginning to feel hungry.

Next block down, a rooster with octopus tentacles was pounding at a large wedge. The placement was wrong, and the wood was resisting and cracking the wrong way. Buddy knew it would finally split, but messily and not into halves.

On the other side a beaver with four monkey-arms was using the axe to chop at his chunk. Chips were flying, but the wood refused to split.

**Disqualified! the official voice said, echoing down the line of blocks wherever wood remained unsplit. All those who had failed retired regretfully. There were still a great many funny-looking creatures in the contest, however.

**Second phase. Vinegar Maple, twitch grain.

Another chunk appeared. Buddy saw at once that it was a really nasty piece. The grain went every which way, folding back on itself jaggedly, and the wood was very hard. It smelled like salad dressing, making him want to sneeze. But it could be split. His head spun with the formless calculations involved, but he finally saw the correct procedure. He tapped five wedges into place, carefully considering each location, so that they were sticking out all over. Then he pounded on them in what he felt to be the proper order. The log began to tick, unevenly. He tapped some more, until the ticking was loud and even. At last he took the hatchet and plunged it into the heartwood exposed between the two largest wedges, severing the twitchiest strand of all.

The chunk stopped ticking. It shuddered, fired off a crackling volley of splinters, expired, and fell apart along the tortuous crevice opened by the wedges. Sap dribbled out, its lifeblood, and in that death agony the salad smell wafted aloft strongly.

—Time! the Snurp cried, heedless of the carnage.

**Approved! the inspector eye said. The wood vanished. Buddy was relieved; there was something he didn't like about the split.

He looked about again. The rooster and the beaver were gone, having been eliminated in the first phase. The adjacent blocks were now occupied by a fish with six hand-like fins and a monster ladybug. The ladybug had split her chunk; the fish had misplaced one wedge and was unable to reach the heartwood cleanly. An agonized keening emanated from his wood.

**Disqualified! the fish's eye cried. He swam away sadly, but Buddy was glad that chunk of wood had survived.

Now there were only a dozen splitters left, including Buddy. He was enjoying this, though he was more hungry than ever. Time

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seemed short when he was working on a sample, but he had been here pretty long.

**Third phase. Scorch Punk, medium rare.

A huge, blackened, grainless mass appeared on his block. He didn't have to worry about killing this; it was more than dead already. And he was in trouble, for he knew the wedges would merely sink into the spongy punk without splitting it. And as for his hatchet—

He saw the ladybug swing her axe at her chunk. The blade cut right into the center—but the wood closed in above it and wouldn't let go, no matter how hard she yanked. It was as though the punk had become stone, anchoring the tool.

Buddy had a bright idea. He struck the wood with his maul, using no wedge. It hardened on contact, and softened again only gradually. He struck it harder, repeatedly, making a pattern of hardness around the top. Then he chopped with the hatchet—and the block cracked along that hard line!

It was cracked but not split. Now he had to place his wedges quickly in the crevice, tapping each to make the hardness form inside, then removing them before they were trapped. Again he chipped, slicing deep into the crack—and it broke open wider.

After the third round, the entire block clove in two—just as the eye appeared and yelled **Disqualified!

—One succeeded in time! the Snurp cried. —Not disqualified!

The eye peered down. **Correction: Approved.

The Snurp relaxed, relieved.

Buddy hoped there would not be much more of this. The splitting was fun in its way, but his stomach was growling.

Only six contestants remained.

**Final phase. Petrified Poplar, veneer grain.

The wood appeared. It was monstrous: a yard wide, and as hard as rock. Buddy found three suitable stress points, but they were impervious to his wedges. It would take far more strength than he possessed to make headway there—and it looked as though three wedges would have to be pounded at once, to unlock this complex boulder.

At the next block a muscular, dog-like contestant circled the chunk with his front paws, heaved it up, placed three wedges points-up on the block with his prehensile tail, turned over the chunk and dropped it on top of them. It shattered into thirds, spraying pebbles. //Time! his second called jubilantly.

Buddy gazed at his own stump with dismay. He could never do that! The wood was twenty times his own weight.

He tried the little hatchet on it,

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hoping for the best. The blade rebounded from the surface, leaving only a scratch. He tried to swing the axe, but this was even worse. He had gotten nowhere, and time was passing.

—One must turn the—the Snurp began.

**Disqualified! the inspector eye said immediately. **No advice permitted from the sideline during the phase.

And the wood vanished, and Buddy had to step back, disappointed and humiliated. He had really wanted to split that ponderous segment—the biggest slice of wood he had ever seen or imagined.

—Why did not one turn the popular over to reveal the veneer-ravel point? the Snurp demanded furiously. —One was intolerably stupid!

Buddy took this as a rebuke. He bore up in silence, as he had learned to do under the constant abuse of his sisters, but he was miserable inside.

The inspector eye appeared. **This contestant places sixth, raw score, it said. **Award ratio now being calculated. What is contestant's maturity index?

—One must provide the information, the Snurp told Buddy.

"Can I go home now? I'm hungry."

—How mature is one? Of what physical/mental duration, relative to the adult of the species?

Buddy looked at the Snurp in perplexity. "What?"

—How *old*?

"Oh. I'm four."

—That would be four sidereal revolutions of one's planet about its star, the Snurp said to the eye. —This species is mature at fifteen or twenty revolutions.

The metal eye focused on Buddy. **One quarter or one fifth of maturity? Standard for this tournament is one half. That would place contestant at par times two plus. First on index, despite failure on final phase.

—The winner! the Snurp cried joyously.

**However, contestant is beneath tournament age of consent. Provide evidence of parental permission.

—Conditions were too pressing to obtain—

"Can I go home now? Everybody'll be mad when they find I'm gone."

**Conditions too pressing? Violation of regulations, Snurptegian agent. Your species has bad recruitment record.

—Unintentional! Oversight! Misunderstanding!

"Can I go home now?" All this talk reminded him too much of the bickering of his sisters.

**Immediately, the eye said grimly. **There will be a full investigation.

And suddenly Buddy was standing beside the chopping

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block behind his house, alone. That ** was certainly prompt!

"There you are, you little brat!" one of his middle sisters exclaimed. "Oh, are you going to get it! You're late for supper and Mom's beside herself!"

That meant a spanking, gleefully delivered by massed sibling might. Buddy managed to bite two fingers, but otherwise got the worst of it. Afterwards, he received some leftover food.

At bedtime Dad came to see him. "Whatever mischief did you get into today, Son?" he asked in his pleasant man-to-man way.

"Wood split." Generally, it was safe to tell things to Dad.

"Would split what, Son?"

"Purple Ash. Corch Punk. And funny things—but the last one was too big. And hard. And I was hungry."

"That's very interesting, Son. You have a fine imagination."

"The Snurp took me. In the washing machine."

"But if you try to tell a story like that to your mother—"

Buddy understood that he was being gently reprimanded. Dad didn't believe him.

"Keep my wedge, Dad?"

"Certainly, Son." Dad reached out for the small red section of metal. "Where did you find that?"

"I stole it from the wood split."

Dad's face became grave. "You will have to return it, Son. Right now. Stealing is wrong."

Dad could be just as unreasonable as Buddy's sisters, when he put his mind to it. Reluctantly, Buddy led the way out into the dark and toward the chopping block. "The Snurp was here, Dad. He took me to the wood split. Where I stole the wedge."

"You're sure, Son?" The tone was dangerous.

"And the eye sent me back. Here."

Dad sighed. "That's not exactly a story I can accept, Son."

It sounded suspiciously like another spanking. Buddy didn't know what to say.

Then a light appeared above the chopping block. It was the eye! **Regret uninformed decision, it said. **Investigation discloses Snurptegian agent at fault. Immature should not have been disqualified.

Dad's hand was on Buddy's shoulder, and it clenched painfully. "Is this the owner of the wedge?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Then give it back."

Buddy held out the wedge. "Here. I stole it."

**Can not alter decision after the fact, the eye said. **Innocent immature was exploited by Snurptegian field agent. Tournament forwards regrets. Herewith, consolation prize: permit to compete in next regional junior championship tournament, and matched set of samples.

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In the dim light shining from the house, or perhaps it was the glow around the eye, Buddy saw a pile of wood rise from nothing. Some chunks reflected the light metallically and some glowed on their own. Elegant wood, faerie wood—all he could ever split. Purple Ash, Vinegar Maple, Scorch Punk—and even the monstrous Petrified Poplar. And countless other exotic varieties amounting to at least a cord. The alien tools were there too—axe, maul, hatchet, wedges.

Dad looked, amazed. "My son was spanked—for telling the truth."

**The Snurptegian agent was spanked too, the eye said. **Trust consolation is adequate.

"No," Dad said. "My boy will not accept goods he has not earned. Take back your shipment."

**As desired, the eye said. The wood vanished. **Respects.

"Respects," Dad replied. The eye winked out.

Buddy was left with nothing. He began to cry.

"It was a payoff," Dad explained gently, as they walked back to the house. "You'll have many opportunities in life to earn your way properly. You wouldn't want to prejudice it all by accepting something like this now, would you?"

"Wood you?" Buddy repeated, not comprehending.

Not then.

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This is a different sort of time travel story about a woman whose peripheral vision reveals a landscape of the past. At first she sees only plants, houses; then she sees a procession of strangers whose movements slowly blend into a situation so compelling that she is driven—against all reason—to set foot into that strange landscape.

THROUGH A GLASS—DARKLY

by Zenna Henderson

I FINALLY GOT SO FRIGHTENED that I decided to go to Dr. Barstow and have my eyes checked.

Dr. Barstow has been my eye doctor for years—all the way from when a monkey bit and broke one lens of my first glasses, up to his current encouraging me through getting used to bifocals. Although I still take them off to thread a needle and put them back on to see across the room, I take his word for it that someday I'll hardly notice the vast no-vision slash across the middle of everywhere I look.

But it wasn't the bifocals that took me to Dr. Barstow. And he knew it. He didn't know that the real reason I went to him was the cactus I saw in my front room. And I could have adjusted to a cactus—even in the front room, but not to the roadrunner darting from my fireplace to my hall door and disappearing with the last, limp two inches of a swallowed snake flapping from his smirking beak.

So Dr. Barstow finished his most thorough investigation of my eyes. Then he sat straddling his little stool and looked at me mildly. "It takes time," he said, "to make the adjustment. Some people take longer—"

"It's not that, Doctor," I said miserably, "even though I could

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smash the things happily some times. No, it's—it's—" Well, there was no helping it. I'd come purposely to tell him. "It's what I see. It's that cactus in my front room." His eyes flicked up quickly to mine. "And right now I'm seeing a prickly pear cactus with fruit on it where your desk is." I swallowed rackingly and he looked at his desk.

For a moment he twiddled with whatever ophthalmologists twiddle with, and then he said, "Have you had a physical check-up recently?" His eyes were a little amused.

"Yes," I replied. "For exactly this reason. And I truly don't think I'm going mad." I paused and mentally rapped a few spots that might have gone soft, but they rang reassuringly sound. "Unless I'm just starting and this is one of the symptoms."

"So it's all visual," he said.

"So far," I said, feeling a flood of relief that he was listening without laughter. It had been frightening, being alone. How can you tell your husband casually that he is relaxing into a cholla cactus with his newspaper? Even a husband like Peter. "All visual except sometimes I think I hear the wind through the cactus."

Dr. Barstow blinked. "You say there's a cactus where my desk is?"

I checked. "Yes, a prickly pear. But your desk is there, too. It's—it's—"

"Superimposed?" he suggested.

"Yes," I said, checking again. "And if you sat down there, it'd be your desk, but—but there's the cactus—" I spread my hands helplessly, "With a blue tarantula hawk flying around over it."

"Tarantula hawk?" he asked.

"Yes, you know, those waspy-looking things. Some are bright blue and some are orangy—"

"Then you see movement, too," he said.

"Oh, yes," I smiled feebly. Now that I was discussing it, it wasn't even remotely a funny story any more. I hadn't realized how frightened I had been. To go blind! Or mad! "That's one reason I asked for an emergency appointment. Things began to move. Saturday it was a horny toad on the mantel, which is a ledge along a sand wash. But yesterday it was a road-runner with a snake in his beak, coming out of the fireplace. The hearth is a clump of chaparral."

"Where is the wasp now?" asked Dr. Barstow.

I checked briefly. "It's gone." And I sat and looked at him forlornly.

He twiddled some more and seemed to be reading his diploma on the wall behind me. I noticed the thin line across his glasses that signaled bifocals, and I wondered absently how long it had taken him to get used to them.

"Did you know that every time you look at your—um—cactus,

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you look away from where you say it is?" he finally asked.

"Away from it!" I exclaimed. "But—"

"How many fruits on the prickly pear?" he asked.

I checked. "Four green ones and a withered—"

"Don't turn your head," he said. "Now what do you see in front of you?"

My eyes swam through a change of focus. "You, holding up three fingers," I said.

"And yet the cactus is where my desk is, and I'm almost at right angles to it." He put down his three fingers. "Every time you've checked the cactus, you've looked at me, and that's completely away from where you say."

"But what—" I felt tears starting and I turned away, ashamed.

"Now turn your head and look directly at my desk," he said. "Do you see the cactus now?"

"No," my voice jerked forlornly. "Just the desk."

"Keep your eyes on the desk," he said. "Don't move your head. Now check my position."

I did—and then I did cry—big sniffy tears. "You're sitting on a rock under a mesquite tree!" I choked, pulling my glasses off blindly.

He handed me a tissue. And another when that became sodden. And a third to wipe those blasted bifocals.

"Does having the glasses off make a difference in what you see?" he asked.

"No," I sniffed. "Only I can see better with them." And I laughed shakily, remembering the old joke about spots-before-the-eyes.

"Well, Mrs. Jessymin," he said. "There's nothing in the condition of your eyes to account for what you're seeing. And this—um—visual manifestation is apparently not in your direct vision, but in your peripheral vision."

"You mean my around-the-edges sight?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Incidentally you have excellent peripheral vision. Much better than most people—"

"Of my advanced age!" I finished, mock bitterly. "These dern bifocals!"

"But bifocals aren't necessarily a sign of age—"

"I know, I know," I said. "Only of getting old."

We had automatically dropped into our usual bifocal speech-pattern while our minds busied themselves elsewhere.

"Does this thing bother you when you drive?" he asked.

I was startled. What if they took my license! "No," I hastened. "Most of the time I don't even notice it. Then sometimes I catch a glimpse of something interesting, and then's when I focus in on it. But it's all voluntary—so far. Paying attention to it, I mean."

"And you focus in as long as

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you look away from it." Dr. Barstow smiled. "As a matter of fact, some things can be seen more sharply in peripheral vision than by looking directly at them. But I'm at a loss to explain your cactus. That sounds like hallucination—"

"Well," I twisted the tissue in my fingers. "I have a sort of idea. I mean, where our house is—it's in a new housing development—it was all desert not too long ago. I've—well—I've wondered if maybe I was seeing the same place, only before. I mean, when it was still desert." I tried a smile, but Dr. Barstow didn't notice.

"Hmm," he said, looking absently again at his diploma. "That would certainly put cactus almost anywhere you looked, in Tucson," he said. "But how long ago are you seeing? This office building is fifteen years old."

"I—I don't know," I faltered. "I haven't thought it out that far."

Dr. Barstow looked at me and smiled his infrequent, wide smile. "Well, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with you," he said. "If I were having an experience as interesting as the one you're having, I'd just enjoy it. I'd start a little research into it. Or at least start compiling a few statistics. How long ago *are* you seeing? Is it the same time period every time? What else can you see? People? Big animals? Enjoy it while you can. It arrived out of nowhere, and it might go back to the same place." He stood up.

So did I. "Then I don't have to worry—"

"Not about your eyes, anyway," he assured me. "Keep me posted if anything new develops." I turned to the door. His voice made me pause there. "By the way, if Tucson were wiped out, eventually the cactus would come back. Are you seeing *ago* or *to come*?"

We looked at each other levelly a moment, then we both smiled and I left.

Of course I told Peter, passing on the latest greetings from our old friend. And Peter, after a few sharp, anxious questions to be sure that I wasn't concealing from him some Monstrous Doom, accepted my odd affliction with his usual slight grin and glint of interest. He has long since realized that I don't see quite eye-to-eye with the usual maturing-into-bifocals groups.

Since I didn't have to worry about it any more, I mostly ignored my side vision. However, there were a few more "sharpenings" in the days that followed.

Once in a Bayless supermarket on double-stamp day, I caused a two-aisle jam of shopping carts because I became so engrossed in one of my peripheral pictures. There I stood at a strategic junction, staring fixedly at a stack of tuna cans while the rising murmur of voices and the muted *clish-*

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clish of colliding carts faded away.

There were people this time, two women and an assortment of small, nearly naked children whose runnings and playings took them in and out of my range of vision like circling, romping puppies. It was a group of Indians. The women were intent on their work. They had a very long, slender sahuaro rib and were busy harvesting the fruit from the top of an enormously tall sahuaro cactus, right in the middle of canned tomatoes. One woman was dislodging the reddish egg-shaped fruit from the top of the cactus with the stick, and the other was gathering it up from the ground into a basket, using a tong-like arrangement of sticks to avoid the thorns that cover the fruit.

I was watching, fascinated, when suddenly I *heard!* There was a soft, singing voice in my mind, and my mind knew it was the woman who knelt in the sandy dust and lifted the thorny fruit.

"Good, good, good!" softly she sang.

"Food for now. Food for later.
Sing good, sing good,
Sing praise, sing praise!"

"Lady, are you all right?" An anxious hand on my elbow brought me back to Bayless and the traffic jam. I blinked and drew a deep breath.

The manager repeated, "Are you all right?" He had efficiently rerouted the various carts, and they were moving away from me now, with eyes looking back, curious, avid, or concerned.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, clutching the handle of my shopping cart. "I—I suddenly remembered something and forgot where I was." I smiled into the manager's anxious face. "I'm all right, thank you. I'm sorry I caused trouble."

"No trouble," he answered my smile a little tentatively. "You're sure—"

"Oh, certainly," I hastened. "Thank you for your kindness." And I moved away briskly to look for the pizza mix that was on sale.

Up and down the aisles through the towering forest of food I hurried, echoing in my mind, as I contrasted the little lifting sticks and my chrome-bright cart—

Good, good
Food for now,
Food for later.
Sing praise! Sing praise!

Several days later I stood in one of those goldfish-bowl telephone booths on a service station corner and listened to the purr as Dr. Barstow's office phone rang. Finally his secretary, Miss Kieth, answered briskly, and he eventually came on the line, probably between eyelashes.

"I'm downtown," I said, hastily, after identifying myself. "I know you're busy, but—how long have your people been in Tucson?"

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There was a slight digestive pause and then he said slowly, "My folks came out here before the turn of the century."

"What—what did they do? I mean, to earn a living? What I mean is, I'm seeing again, right now. There's a big sign over a store, *Jas. R. Barstow and Sons General Merchandise.* And if *Jas.* means James, well, that's you—" I wiped a tissue across my oozing forehead and grimaced at the grime. Dr. Barstow broke the breathing silence.

"That was my great-grandfather. At least he's the one long enough ago with the right name. Can you still see the place?" His voice quickened.

"Yes," I said, concentrating on the telephone mouthpiece. "I'm dying to go in it and see all that General Merchandise. But I don't think I can go in—not yet. What I wanted to know is, *when* is the store?"

After a minute he asked, "Does it have a porch over the sidewalk?"

I stared studiously at the dial of the phone. "Yes," I said, "with peeled-pine porch posts," I dabbled my lips, "holding up the roof."

"Then it's after 1897," he said. "That was one of our favorite 'olden days' stories—the one about the store burning down. And the magnificent one that rose from the ashes. It boasted a porch.

"Then that's when I'm seeing!" I cried. "Around the turn of the century!"

"If," came his voice cautiously, "if all your seeing is in the same period of time."

"Someday," I said determinedly after a slight pause, "someday I'm going to get a flat 'yes' or 'no' from you about something!"

"And won't that be dull?" I heard him chuckle as he hung up.

I walked over to the store on the next scramble WALK signal at the corner. The concrete clicked under my hurried feet, but when I stepped up to the far sidewalk, my feet rang hollowly on a wooden porch floor. Hastily, lest a change should come, I hurried across uneven planks to the door. I grabbed the handle. Then, I paused, taking a deep breath of a general-store smell that was instantly recognizable—I could smell now!

"Oh!" I thought, the pit of my stomach cold with excitement. "To see all the things we keep in museums and collections now! Just walk in and—"

Then I heard Peter, vigorously and decisively, *"Don't you dare take one step into this—!"*

Caught in midstep, I turned my full gaze on the handle I held. Jarringly, I thumped down several inches to the sidewalk. I removed my hand from where it was pressed against a dusty, empty store window. Automatically I read the sign propped against the

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stained, sagging back of the display window—*You'll wonder where the yellow went—*

The week following there came an odd sort of day. It had rained in the night—torrents of rain that made every upside-down drainage street in Tucson run curb to curb. The thirsty earth drank and drank and couldn't keep up with the heavy fall, so now the run-off was making Rillito Creek roar softly to itself as it became again, briefly, a running stream. The dust had been beautifully settled. An autumn-like sky cover of heavy gray clouds hid the sun.

Peter and I decided this was the time for us to relearn the art of bicycling and to do something about my black belt that never lied when it pinched me the news that I was increasing around the middle. It was also time for Peter to stop being critical of the laundromat for shrinking his pants. So, on this cool, moisty morning we resurrected the bikes from the accumulation in the garage. We stacked them awkwardly in the car trunk and drove across the Rillito, stopping briefly at the bridge to join others who stood around enjoying the unusual sight of Water-in-a-River! Then we went on up through the mushrooming foothills land developments, until we finally arrived at a narrow, two-rutted, sandy road that looped out of sight around the low hills and abrupt arroyos. We parked the car and got the bikes out.

It was a wonderful day, fragrant with wet greasewood-after-a-rain. The breeze was blowing, cool enough for sleeves to feel good. It was a dustless, delightful breeze.

"I love days like this," I said, as I wobbled away from the car on my bike. I made ten feet before I fell. "I get so lonesome for rain."

Peter patiently untangled me from the bike, flexed my arms to see if they were broken, flexed my neck to kiss the end of my nose, then tried to steady my bike with both hands and, at the same time, help me get back on. "I get so tired of sun, sun, sun—"

"You talk like a native," said Peter, making nice straight tracks in the damp sand of the road.

"So I am," I said, my tracks scalloping back and forth across his as I tried to follow him. "It's only you fotched-on-furriners that find perpetual sun so delightful."

I fell again, this time contriving to have the bike fall one way and me the other with the pedals and my feet twined together.

Peter was extricating me, muttering something about a donkey being better for me since it's braced at all four corners, when I saw it—on the next loop of the road where it topped the rise above us.

"Peter," I said softly, staring at him. "I can see a horse pulling a

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buggy on the road over there. There's another and another and a hay wagon-looking vehicle. Peter, it's a procession of some sort."

Peter straightened my legs and sat down on the ground near me. "Go on," he said, taking my hands.

"There's something on the hay wagon," I said. "It looks—it's a coffin, Peter!" The back of my neck chilled.

"A coffin?" Peter was startled, too.

"They're going down the other side of the hill now. There are three buggies and the wagon. They're gone—"

"Come on," said Peter, getting up and lifting the bikes, "Let's follow them."

"Follow them?" I grabbed my bike and tried to remember which side to mount from—or does that only matter for horses? "Did you see them, too?"

"No," he said, flinging himself up onto the bike. "But you did. Let's see if you *can* follow them."

And behold! I could ride my bike! All sorts of muscular memories awoke, and I forgot the problems of aiming and balancing, and I whizzed—slowly—through the sand at the bottom of a rise, as I followed Peter.

"I don't see them!" I called to Peter's bobbing back. "I guess they're gone."

"Are you looking over there?" he called back.

"Of course I am!" I cried. "Oh!" I murmured. "Oh, of course." And I looked out over the valley. I noticed one slender column of smoke rising from Davis-Monthan Air Base before my peripheral vision took over.

"Peter," I said. "It is a coffin. I'm right by the wagon. Don't go so fast. You're leaving us behind."

Peter dropped back to ride beside me. "Go on," he said. "What kind of buggies are they?"

I stared out over the valley again, and my bike bucked up over a granite knob in the sand, and I fell. Peter swung back towards me as I scrambled to my feet. "Leave the bikes," I said. "Let's walk. They're going slow enough—"

A fine rain had begun. With it came the soft sense of stillness I love so about the rain. Beside me, within my vision, moved the last buggy of the procession, also through a fine rain that was not even heavy enough to make a sound on its faded black top, but its color began to darken and to shine.

There were two people in the buggy, one man driving the single horse, the other man, thin, wrinkled, smelling of musty old age and camphor, bundled in his heavy overcoat, under a lap robe. A fine tremor stirred his knotted hands, and his toothless mouth grinned a little to show the pink smoothness of his lower gums.

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I lengthened my stride to keep up with the slow-moving procession, hearing the gritty grind of the metal tires through the sand. I put out my hand to rest it on the side of the buggy, but drew it back again, afraid I might feel Something. Then I sensed the insistent seep of a voice, soundless, inside my mind.

Seventeen trips to the cemetery—and back again! That's more than anyone else around here can say. I'll see them all underground yet! There—and back! I go there and come back. They all stay!

The rain was heavier. I could feel its gnat-like insistence against my face. The road was swinging around the base of a long, low hill now.

So this is what she came to. Another thought began. *She was a pretty little thing. Thought sure some young feller around here would have spoke for her. They say she was bad. Shipped her back from the city to bury her. Women sure had a fit about burying her with their honored dead. Honored dead! Honored because they* are *dead. Every evil in the book safely underground here in the graveyard. Hope Papa's having a good time. Sure likes funerals.*

I reeled away from the buggy. I had walked full-tilt into a fence post. Peter grabbed me before I fell.

"Well?" he asked, pushing a limp, wet strand of my hair off my forehead.

"I'm okay," I said. "Peter, is there a cemetery around here anywhere? You've hunted these foothills often enough to know."

"A cemetery?" Peter's eyes narrowed. "Well, there are a few graves in a fence corner around here someplace. Come on!"

We abandoned the road and started across country. As we trudged up one hill and scurried down another, threading our way through cactus and mesquite, I told Peter what I'd seen and heard.

"There!" Peter gestured to the left, and we plunged down into a sand wash that walked firmly because the night rain had packed the sand, and up the other steep side and topped out onto a small flat. Half a dozen forlorn sunken mounds lay in the corner of two barbwire fences' meeting. Gray, wordless slabs of weathered wood splintered at the heads of two of them. Small rocks half outlined another.

I looked up at the towering Santa Catalinas and saw Peter. "Move, Peter," I said. "You're standing on a grave. There are dozens of them."

"Where can I stand?" Peter asked.

"In the fence corner," I said, "There's no fence there—only a big rock. Here they come."

I moved over to where the pro-

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cession was coming through the barbwire fence. I stood there, hearing the waves of voices breaking over me.

The first buggy—

Bad—bad! Rouged, even in her coffin. I should have wiped it off the way I started to. Disgraceful! Why did she have to humiliate me like this by coming back? They've got places in the city for people like her. She was dead to respectability a long time ago. Why did she come back?

The woman pinched her lips together more tightly behind the black veil and thought passionately, *Punish her! Punish her! The wages of sin!*

The next buggy was passing me now. *Poor child—oh, poor child—to come back so unwanted. Please, God, cleanse her of all her sins—*

There were two women and a man in this buggy.

Good rain. Needed it. Oughta be home getting things done, not trailing after a fancy woman. Good rain for this time of year.

The metal tires gritted past me.

They'll be bringing me out here next. I'm dying! I'm dying! I know. I know. Mama died of the same thing. I'm afraid to tell. All they could do would be to tell me I'll be the next one to come out here. I'm afraid! I'm afraid! I'm crying for myself, not her!

A woman alone was driving the next buggy—a smart, shiny, vehicle. She was easily controlling the restless horse.

At least she has had someone love her, whether it was good or bad. How many wanted her and had her doesn't matter now. Someone cared about what she did and liked the way she looked. Someone loved her.

By now the men had got out of the buggies—all except the old one—and I heard the grating sound as they dragged the coffin from the hayrack. It thumped to an awkward angle against the mound of desert dirt, rocks, caliche, and the thin sandy soil of the hillside. It was seized and lowered quickly and ungently to the bottom of the grave. The men got shovels from their vehicles. They took off their coats, hitched their sleeve garters higher, and began to fill in the grave.

"Isn't anyone going to pray?" The shocked cry came from the one woman. "Isn't anyone going to pray?"

There was a short, uneasy pause.

"Preacher's prayed over her already," said one of the men. "For her kind, that's enough."

The woman stumbled to the half-filled grave and fell to her knees. Maybe I was the only one who heard her. *"She loved much—forgive her much."*

Peter and I sat warming our hands by cradling our coffee mugs

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in them. We were in a little hamburger joint halfway back home. Outside the rain purred down, seething on the blacktop road, thrumming insistently on metal somewhere out back. We sat, each busy with his own thoughts, and watched the rain furrow the sandy shoulder of the road. It *was* an unusual rain for this time of year.

"Well," my voice lifted Peter's eyes from his coffee. He lifted one brow inquiringly. "I have Told All," I went on. "What is your considered opinion?"

"Interesting," he said. "Not everyone's aberrant wife has such interesting aberrations."

"No, I mean," I carefully balanced the tinny spoon on my forefinger, "What—why—"

"Let's not try to explain anything," said Peter. "In the first place, I know I can't, and I don't think you can either. Let's enjoy, as Dr. Barstow suggested."

"Where do you suppose they shipped Gayla home from?" I asked.

"Gayla?" said Peter. "Where did you get that name? Did someone call her by it?"

I felt goose bumps run down my arms to the elbows. "No," I said, thinking back over the recent events. "No one mentioned any names, but—but her name is—was—is Gayla!"

We eyed one another and I plunged back into words.

"Maybe from Phoenix," I said. "It was rather fleshpotty in the old days."

"Or Tombstone, maybe?" suggested Peter. "It was even more so."

"Did Tombstone have a railway?" I asked, lifting my cup. "I don't remember seeing a depot there even nowadays. I think Benson would be the closest."

"Maybe it wasn't by rail," said Peter. "Maybe freight. You know, those big wagons."

"It was by rail," I said, grimacing at the taste of cold coffee. Peter laughed. "Well," I said, "I don't like cold coffee."

"It wasn't that," said Peter. "You're sure her name is Gayla and that she came home by rail, but you can't remember whether or not Tombstone has a depot, and we were through there last week!"

"Peter," I said through the pluming steam of a fresh cup of coffee. "That brings up something interesting. This—this *thing* is progressive. First I only saw still things. Then moving things. Then people. Then I heard thoughts. Today I heard two people talk out loud. And now I know something about them that I didn't see or hear. How far do you suppose—"

Peter grabbed both my hands, sloshing coffee over our tight fingers. "Don't you dare!" he said tensely. "Don't you dare take one step into whatever this is! Look if you want to and listen when you can, but stay out of it!"

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My jaw dropped. "Peter!" My breath wasn't working very well. "Peter, that's what you said when I was going to go into that store. Peter, how could I hear then what you didn't say until now? Or are you just saying again what you said then—Peter!"

Peter mopped my hands and his. "You didn't tell me that part about the store." So I did. And it shook him, too. Peter suddenly grinned and said, "Whenever I said it, it's worth repeating. *Stay out of this!*" His grin died and his hands tightened on mine. His eyes were troubled.

"Let's go home," I said, tears suddenly biting the back of my eyes. "I don't call this enjoying."

As we left the cafe, I said, "Peter, do you think that if we went back up there we could pick up the procession again and follow it again—"

"No," he said. "Not unless we could duplicate everything—time, temperature, humidity, mental state—maybe even the color of lipstick you had on once today." He grinned at me. "You look a little bedraggled."

"*Look* bedraggled?" I eased myself into the car. "How do you suppose I feel? And the bicycling hasn't helped matters much, either. I think I sprained something."

Later that week I was trying to find an address in a new subdivision of curved streets, cul-de-sacs too narrow to turn in, and invisible house numbers. Finally I even forgot the name of the stravenue I was looking for. I pulled up to park along a school fence on Fort Lowell Road. I was rummaging in my purse, trying to find the paper I had written the address on, when I stopped in midrummage.

From the corner of my eye I could see the school grounds—hard-packed adobe around a swing and teeter-totter, and the front door of a tiny, one-roomed school house. The children were outside for a ghostly recess. I heard no sound. I studiously kept my eyes on the city map spread out on the steering wheel as I counted twelve children, though one hyperactive little boy might have been number one, nine and twelve, he moved so fast.

I was parked next to a three-strand barbwire fence lined by chaparral more than head-high in places. It formed a rough hedge around the school grounds. Right by my car was a break in the brush through which I could see the school. Clouds were stacking above the school in tumbled blue and white. Over the Catalinas a silent lightning flicked and flicked again. With the squeal of the children spattered by a brief gust of raindrops, the audio of the scene began to function.

The clang of a handbell caught all the children in midstride and

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then pulled them, running, towards the school house. I smiled and went back to comparing the map that stubbornly insisted that the east-west stravenue I sought was a north-south *calle*, with the address on the paper.

A side movement brought the playground back into my periphery. A solid chunk of a child was trudging across the playground, exasperation implicit in the dangling jerk of her arms as she plodded, her nondescript skirts catching her shins and flapping gracelessly behind her. She was headed straight for me and I wondered ruefully if I was going to get walked through, body, bones and car. Then the barbwire fence and the clumps of brush focused in.

Gayla—I knew her as I would a long-time acquaintance—was crouched under a bush on ground that had been worn floor-hard and smooth by small bodies. She was hidden from the school by the bushes but sat, leaning forearms—careful of the barbs—on the second strand of wire that sagged with repetitions of such scenes. She was looking, dreamy-faced, through me and beyond me.

"Make my own way," she murmured. "Doesn't that sound lovely! A highway. Make my own way along the highway, away, away—"

"Gayla!" The plodding girl had reached the bushes. "The bell rang a long time ago! Miss Pederson's awful mad at you. This is the third time this week she's had to send for you! And it's going to rain—" The girl dropped to all fours and scrambled by one of the well-worn paths into the tiny room-like enclosure with Gayla. "You better watch out!" She snatched her wadded skirts from under her knees. "Next thing you know she'll be telling your Aunt Faith on you."

"Aunt Faith—" Gayla stirred and straightened. With both hands she put back the dark curling of her front hair. "Know what she said this morning, Vera? This is my last year in school. She said I'm getting old enough to make my own way—" She savored the words.

"Oh, Gayla!" Vera sank back against her heels. "Isn't she going to let you finish with me? Only another year and then we'll be fourteen—"

"No. I've been a burden long enough, she said, taking food out of her own children's mouths. No—" Her eyes dreamed through me again. "I'm going to make my own way. To the city. I'm going to find a job there—"

"The city!" Vera laughed shortly. "Silly! As if your aunt would let you go! And what kind of job do you think you could find, being so young?

"Ben Collins is looking for a girl again. I'll bet your Aunt Faith—"

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"Ben Collins!" Gayla's startled face swung about to look at Vera. "What's the matter with Ruth?"

"She's going to live with her uncle in Central. She'd rather milk cows and chop cotton than tend that Collins bunch. You think sleeping four to a bed is crowded. At least there's room for two at each end. At Collins' you'll sleep five to a bed—crosswise.

"Come *on*, Gayla! Miss Pederson's throwing a fit—"

She began to back out of the playhouse.

"If Aunt Faith tries to make me go there, I'll run away." Gayla was following slowly, the two girls face to face on hands and knees. "And don't you go telling, either, Vera. I'll run away to the city and get rich and when I come back, she'll be sorry she was so mean. But I'll forgive her and give her a magnificent gift, and she'll cry and beg my—"

"Your Aunt Faith cry!" Vera snickered. "Not that I believe for one minute that you'll ever run away, but if you do, don't ever come back. You know your Aunt Faith better than that!"

The two girls emerged from the bushes and stood erect. Vera towed the reluctant Gayla toward the school house. Gayla looked wistfully back over her shoulder at the dusty road leading away from the school. *Make my own way.* I heard the thought trail behind her like a banner. *Seek my fortune, and someone who'll love me. Someone who'll want me.*

Lightning stabbed out of the darkening sky. A sudden swirling wind and an icy spate of stinging raindrops that came with the thunder jolting across the hills, sent the two girls racing for the school house and—

My windshield was speckling with rain. I blinked down at my street map. There was my stravenue, right under my thumb, neither north-and-south nor east-and-west, but sidling off widdershins across the subdivision. I started my car and looked for a moment at the high cyclone fence that now enclosed the huge sprawl of the modern school. "Her own way! Was it *her* way—"

I suppose I could have started all sorts of scholarly research to find out who Gayla was, but I didn't, mostly because I knew it would be unproductive. Even in my birth-time, a birth registration was not required around here. Neither were death certificates or burial permits. It was not only possible, but very commonplace in those days to be one whose name was 'writ in water'. And an awful lot of water had been writ in since the turn of the century—if so she lived then. Then, too, I didn't care to make a cold black-and-white business of this seeing business. I agreed with Dr. Barstow. I preferred to enjoy. I'd rather have Gayla and girl friend swept away

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from me diagonally across a windy playground under a thunder-heavy sky.

Well, in the days that followed, a cactus wren built a nest roughly where the upper right corner of Peter's easy chair came, and for a while I couldn't help laughing every time I saw her tiny head peering solemnly over Peter's ear as she earnestly sat and sat.

"But no worms," said Peter firmly. "She'd better not dribble worms on me and my chair when her fine-feathered infants arrive."

"I imagine worms would be the least of your worry as far as dribbling goes," I said. "Baby birds are so messy!"

Occasionally I wondered about Gayla, my imagination trying to bridge the gap between *making my own way* and the person over whom no one had cared to pray. Had she become a full-fledged Scarlet Woman with all the sinful luxury associated with the primrose path, or had she slipped once or been betrayed by some Ben Collins? Too often a community will, well, play down the moral question if the sin is large—and profitable—enough, but a small sin is never let to die. Maybe it's because so few of us have the capacity to sin in the grand manner, but we all can sin sordidly. And we can't forgive people for being as weak as we are.

You understand, of course, that any number of ordinary things were happening during this time. These peripheral wanderings were a little like recurring headaches. They claimed my whole attention while they were in progress, but were speedily set aside when they were over.

Well, Fall came and with it, the hunting season. Peter decided to try for his deer in the rapidly diminishing wilds of the foothills of the Catalinas. He went out one Saturday to look the ground over and came back fit to be tied.

"Two new fences!" he roared. "One of them straight across Flecha Cayendo Wash and the other running right along the top of the hills above Fool's Pass! And that's not all. A road! They've 'dozed out a road! You know that little flat where we like to picnic? Well, the road goes right through it!"

"Not where we wait for the lights in town to come on!" I cried.

"And now they'll use those same lights to sell those quarter million dollar houses with huge picture windows that look out over the valley and have good heavy curtains to pull across as soon as the sun goes down—"

So, in the week following, Peter found another way into the Catalinas. It involved a lot of rough mileage and a going-away-from before a returning-to the area he wanted to hunt. We went out one

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early morning armed with enthusiasm, thirty-ought-sixes, and hunting licenses, but we walked the hills all day and didn't get a glimpse of a deer, let alone a shot.

We came back that evening, exhausted, to the flat where we had left the car. We had planned, in case of just such luck, to spend the night under the stars and start out again the next day, so we unloaded.

We built our campfire of splintered, warped odds and ends of lumber we salvaged from the remnants of a shack that sagged and melted to ruin in the middle of a little flat. We ate our supper and were relaxing against a sun-warmed boulder in the flicker of the firelight when the first raindrops fell and hissed in the fire.

"Rain?" Peter held out his hand incredulously. The sunset had been almost cloudless.

"Rain," I said resignedly, having been whacked on my dusty bifocals with two big drops.

"I might have known," said Peter morosely. "I suspected all afternoon that your muttering and scrambling was some sort of incantation, but did it have to be a rain dance?"

"It wasn't," I retorted. "It was a hole in my left sock and I have the blister to prove it."

"Well, let's get the tarp out," said Peter. "'S probably just a sprinkle, but we might as well have something overhead."

We busied ourselves arranging our sleeping bags and stretching the tarp over them. I poured what was left of the coffee into the thermos and put the rest of the food back into the chuck box.

But it wasn't a sprinkle. The thrum on the tarp over us got louder and louder. Muffled thunder followed the flush of lightning. Rain was a solid curtain between us and the edge of our flat. I felt a flutter of alarm as the noise increased steadily. And increased again.

"Boy! This is a gully washer!" Peter ducked his dripping head back into the shelter after a moment's glance out in the downpour. "The bottom's dropped out of something!"

"I think it's our camp floor," I said. "I just put my hand up to the wrist in running water!"

We scrambled around bundling things back into the car. My uneasiness was increased by the stinging force of the rain on my head and shoulders as we scrambled, and by the wading we had to do to get into the car. I huddled in the front seat, plucking at the tight, wet knot of my soaked scarf as Peter slithered off in the darkness to the edge of the flat and sloshed back a little quicker than he had gone. Rain came into the car with him.

"The run-off's here already," he said. "We're marooned—on a desert island. Listen to the roar!"

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Above and underlying the roar of the rain on the car roof, I could hear a deeper tone—a shaking, frightening roar of narrow sand washes trying to channel off a cloudburst.

"Oh, Peter!" My hand shook on his arm. "Are we safe here? Is this high enough?" Rain was something our area prayed for, but often when it came, it did so in such huge, punishing amounts in such a short time that it was terrifying. And sometimes the Search-and-Rescue units retrieved bodies far downstream, not always sure whether they had died of thirst or were drowned.

"I think we're okay," Peter said. "I doubt if the whole flat would cave into the washes, but I think I'd better move the car more nearly into the middle, just in case."

"Don't get too close to that old shack," I warned, peering through a windshield the wipers couldn't clear. "We don't want to pick up a nail."

"The place was mostly 'dobe, anyway," said Peter, easing the car to a stop and setting the hand brake. "This storm'll probably finish melting it down."

We finally managed to make ourselves a little foreshortenedly comfortable in the car for the night. Peter had the back seat and I had the front. I lay warm and dry in my flannel gown—Peter despaired of ever making me a genuine camper, *a nightgown?*—my head propped on the armrest. Pulling up the blanket, I let the drumming roar of the rain wash me past my prayers in steadily deepening waves into sleep.

The light woke me. Struggling, I freed one elbow from the cocoon of my blanket and lifted myself, gasping a little from a stiff neck. I was lost. I couldn't square the light with any light in our house nor the stiff neck with my down pillow nor the roar around me with any familiar home noise. For a moment I was floating in a directionless, timeless warm bath of Not Being. Then I pulled myself up a little higher, and suddenly the car and all the circumstances were back, and I blinked sleepily at the light.

The light? I sat up and fumbled for the shoe where I'd left my glasses. What was a light doing on this flat? And so close that it filled the whole of my window? I wiped my glasses on a fold of my gown and put them on. The wide myopic flare of light concentrated then to a glow, softer, but still close. I rolled the car window down and leaned my arms on the frame.

The room was small. The floor was dirt, beaten hard by use. Rain was roaring on a tin roof and it had come in under the unpainted wooden door, darkening the sill and curling in a faintly silver wet-

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ness along one wall. A steady-dripping leak from the ceilingless roof had dug a little crater in the floor in one corner, and each heavy drop exploded muddily in its center. Steam plumed up from the spout of a granite-ware tea-kettle on the small cast-iron stove that glowed faintly pink through its small isinglass window on the front. The light was on the table. It was a kerosene lamp, its flame, turned too high, was yellow and jagged, occasionally smoking the side of the glass chimney. It was so close to me that the faint flare of light was enough to make shadowy the room beyond the table.

"It's that peripheral thing again," I thought and looked straight at the lamp. But it didn't fade out! The car did instead! I blinked, astonished. This wasn't peripheral—it was whole sight! I looked down at my folded arms. My sleeves were muddy from a damp adobe window sill.

Movement caught my attention—movement and sound. I focused on the dim interior of the room. There was an iron bedstead in the far corner. And someone was in it—in pain. And someone was by it—in fear and distress.

"It hurts! It hurts!" the jerky whisper was sexless and ageless because of pain. "Where's Jim?"

"I told you. He went to see if he could get help. Maybe Gramma Nearing or even a doctor." The voice was patient. "He can't get back because of the storm. Listen to it!"

We three listened to the roar of the flooded washes, the drum of the rain and, faintly, the splash of the leaking roof.

"I wish he was—" the voice lost its words and became a smothered, exhausted cry of pain.

I closed my eyes—and lost the sound along with the sight. I opened my eyes hastily. The room was still there, but the dampness by the door was a puddle now, swelling slowly in the lamplight. The leak in the corner was a steady trickle that had overrun its crater and become a little dust-covered snake that wandered around, seeking the lowest spot on the floor.

The person on the bed cried out again, and, tangled in the cry, came the unmistakable thin wail of the newborn. A baby! I hitched myself higher on my folded arms. My involuntary blinking as I did so moved time again in the small room. I peered into the pale light.

A woman was busy with the baby on the table. As she worked, she glanced anxiously and frequently over at the bed corner. She had reached for some baby clothes when a sound and movement from the corner snatched her away from the table so hastily that the corner of the blanket around the baby was flipped back, leaving the tiny chest uncovered. The baby's face turned blindly,

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and its mouth opened in a soundless cry. The soft lamplight ran across its wet, dark hair as the head turned.

"It won't stop!" I don't know whether I caught the panting words or the thought. "I can't stop the blood! Jim! Get here! God help me!"

I tried to see past the flair of light but could only sense movement. If only I could—but what could I do? I snatched my attention back to the baby. Its mouth was opening and closing in little gasping motions. Its little chest was laboring, but it wasn't breathing!

"Come back!" I cried—silently?—aloud? "Come back! Quick! The baby's dying!"

The vague figure moving beyond the light paid no attention. I heard her again, desperately, "Vesta! What am I supposed to do? I can't—"

The baby was gasping still, its face shadowing over with a slaty blue. I reached. The table was beyond my finger tips. I pulled myself forward over the sill until the warped board of the wide framing cut across my stomach. My hand hovered over the baby.

Somewhere, far, far behind me, I heard Peter cry out sleepily and felt a handful of my flannel gown gathered up and pulled. But I pulled too, and, surging forward, wide-eyed, afraid to blink and thus change time again, I finally touched the thin little subsiding chest.

My reach was awkward. The fingers of my one hand were reaching beyond their ability, the other was trying to keep me balanced on the window sill as I reached. But I felt the soft, cold skin, the thin stuff of the turned-back blanket, the fragile baby body under my palm.

I began a sort of one-handed respiration attempt. Two hands would probably have crushed the tiny rib cage. Compress—release—compress—release. I felt sweat break out along my hairline and upper lip. It wasn't working. Peter's tug on me was more insistent. My breath cut off as the collar of my gown was pulled tightly backward.

"Peter!" I choked voicelessly. "Let me go!" I scrambled through the window, fighting every inch of the way against the backward tug, and reached for the child. There was a sudden release that staggered me across the table. Or over the table? My physical orientation was lost.

I bent over the child, tilting its small, quiet face up and back. In a split second I reviewed everything I had heard or read about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and then sent my fervent petitionary prayer into the lungs of the child with the first breath.

I had never tried this before, but I breathed—not too hard! It's

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a baby—and paused and breathed and paused and breathed, losing myself in the rhythm, losing my sight in a too-close blur, afraid to close my eyes.

Then there was movement! *Breathe.* And a gasp! *Breathe.* And a turning! *Breathe.* And a thin wail that strengthened and lifted and filled the room.

My eyes ached with keeping them wide, and I was gasping. Blessedly the room swam grayly. I thought, *Peter! Oh, Peter!* And felt a small twitch at the hem of my gown. And felt the flannel tug me back to awareness. There was a movement beyond the lamp.

"My baby." The voice was hardly audible. "Hattie, let me see my baby before I die."

"Vesta!" Hattie's voice was sharp with anxiety. "Don't talk about dying! And I can't leave you now. Not even to—"

"I want to see my baby," the faint voice persisted. "Hattie, please—"

I looked down at the still-wailing child, its face, reddening with life, its clenched fists blindly beating the air. Then I was with the baby near the bed. The young face in the shadows below was a vague white blur. The baby fit into the thin curve of the young shoulder.

"I can't see!" The pale, suffering face fretted in the shadows of the bed corner. "It's too dark."

Hattie whirled from the empty table, the lamp she had just lifted tilting heavy black smoke against one side of the chimney, slanting heavily in her hands. She righted it, her eyes terrified, and looked quickly back over her shoulder. Her face, steadied by the determined set of her mouth, was white as she brought the lamp to the bed, her free hand curving around the top of the chimney to cut the draft. She held the lamp high.

Vesta weakly brought herself up to one elbow above the baby and peered down at the crumpled face and the smudge of dark hair.

"A girl," she smiled softly, "Name her Gayla, Hattie. It's a happy name. Maybe she will be—" Her face whitened and she slid slowly down from her elbow. "Oh, I wish," she whispered. "I wish I could see her grown up!"

The sound of the rain filled the silence that followed, and the tug on my gown was no longer a tug, it was an insistence, an imperative. My gown was straining back so that I felt as if I were a figurehead on a ship. I moved involuntarily backwards.

"Who came?" Vesta's fading voice was drowsy.

"There's nobody here but me." Hattie's voice jerked.

"I thought someone came." Now she was fading, and the whole room was stirring like a bowl full of smoke, and I was being drawn back through it, hearing Hattie's, "There's nobody here but me—"

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The sound of the baby's cry cut through the rain sound, the swirling smoke, and Hattie's voice. I heard Vesta's tender crooning, "There, there, Gayla, there, there."

Then I faded—and could finally close my eyes. I faded into an intolerable stretching from adobe window sill to car window, a stretching from Then to Now, a stretching across impossibility. I felt pulled out so thin and tight that it seemed to me the sudden rush of raindrops thrummed on me as on the tightened strings of some instrument. I think I cried out. Then there was a terrific tug and a feeling of coming unstuck, and then I was face down, halfway out of the car window, rain parting my hair with wet insistent hands, hearing Peter's angry, frightened voice, "Not even sense enough to come in out of the rain!"

It took quite a while to convince Peter that I was all there. And quite a time to get my wet hair dried. And to believe that there were no mud stains on the sleeves of my gown. And an even longer, disjointed time to fill Peter in on what had happened.

He didn't have much to say about what happened from his point of view. "Bless the honest flannel!" He muttered as he wrapped me in a scratchy blanket and the warmth of his arms. "I was sure it was going to tear before I could get you back. I held on like grim death with that flannel stretching like a rubber band out the window and into the dark—into nothing! There I was, like hanging onto a kite string! A flannel one! Or a fishing line! A flannel one! Wondering what would happen if I had let go? If I'd had to let go!"

We comforted each other for the unanswerable terror of the question. And I told him all of it again, and together we looked once more at the memory of the white, young face floating in the darkness. And the reddening small face, topped by its smudge of black, floating in the yellow flood of lamplight.

Then I started up, crying, "Oh, Peter, what did I save her for?"

"Because you couldn't let her die," he said, pulling me back.

"I don't mean why did I save her. I mean for what did I save her? For making her own way? For that's enough for her kind? For what did I save her?" I felt sorrow flood over me.

Peter took my shoulders and shook me. "Now, look here," he said sternly. "What makes you think you had anything to do with whether she lived or died? You may have been an instrument. On the other hand, you may have just wanted so badly to help that you thought you did. Don't go appointing yourself judge and jury over the worth of anyone's life. You

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only know the little bit that touched you. And for all you know, that little bit is all hallucination."

I caught my breath in a hiccoughy sob and blinked in the dark. "Do you think it's all hallucination?" I asked quietly.

Peter tucked me back into the curve of his shoulder. "I don't know what I think," he said. "I'm just the observer. And most likely that's all you are. Let's wait until morning before we decide.

"Go to sleep. We have hunting to do in the morning, too."

"In all this rain and mud?"

"Wait till morning," he repeated.

Long after his steady, sleeping breath came and went over my head, I lay and listened to the intermittent rain on the roof—and thought.

Finally the tight knot inside me dissolved, and I relaxed against Peter.

Now that I had seen Gayla born, I could let her be dead. Or I could keep her forever the dreaming child in the playhouse on the school grounds. Why I had become involved in her life, I didn't need to know any more than I needed to know why I walked through the wrong door one time and met Peter. I tucked my hand against my cheek, then roused a little. Where were my glasses?

I groped on the car floor. My shoe. Yes, the glasses were there, where I always put them when we're camping. I leaned again and slept.

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STOP!

by Isaac Asimov

As some of my Gentle Readers may know, I am an after-dinner speaker when I can be persuaded to be one. (For the information of prospective persuaders, I may as well state at once that the best persuasion is a large check.)

As a speaker, I must be introduced, of course, and introductions vary in quality. It's not difficult to see that a short introduction is better than a long one since much preliminary talk dulls the edge of the audience and makes the speaker's task harder.

Again, a dull introduction is better than a witty one, since a speaker can easily suffer by contrast with preliminary wit, and an audience that might otherwise be receptive enough becomes critical after the joy of the introduction.

Needless to say, then, the very worst possible introduction a speaker can have is one that is both long and witty, and on the night of April 20, 1970, at Pennsylvania State University, that is exactly what I got.

Phil Klass (far better known to science fiction fans as William Tenn) is Associate Professor of English at Penn State and it naturally fell to him to introduce me. With an evil smile on his face, he got up and delivered an impassioned address that went on for fifteen minutes and that had the audience of some twelve hundred people rocking with laughter (at my expense, naturally). As he went on, a kind of grimness settled about my soul. I couldn't possibly follow him; he was too good. Naturally, I decided to kill him as soon as I got my hands on him, but first I had to live through my own talk.

And then at the very last minute, Phil (I'm sure, unintentionally) saved me. He concluded his talk by saying, "But don't let me give you the idea that Asimov is a Renaissance Man. He has never, after all, sung 'Rigoletto' at the Metropolitan Opera."

I brightened up at once, rose smiling from my seat, and mounted the stage. I waited for the polite opening applause to die down and, with-

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out preliminary, launched my resonant baritone into "Bella figlia dell'amore—" the opening of the famous Quartet from Rigoletto.

It was the first time I ever got the biggest laugh of the entire evening with my first four words, and after that I had no trouble at all.

I tell you all this because in April, 1970, I gave nine talks which, despite Rigoletto, were not funny at all. It was the month in which the first Earth-Day was celebrated, and every one of my talks dealt, in whole or in part, with the coming catastrophe.

I have discussed that catastrophe in these pages in such articles as THE POWER OF PROGRESSION (F & SF, May 1969) and MY PLANET, 'TIS OF THEE (F & SF, July 1970), and I have made it quite plain that in my opinion the first order of business is a halt to the population increase on Earth. Without such a halt right away, none of mankind's problems can be solved under any conditions; *none!*

The question then is: How can the population increase be halted?

Since this is now the prime question and, indeed, the only relevant question that futurists have to face, and since science fiction writers were futurists long before the word was invented, and since I am self-admittedly one of the leading science fiction writers, I consider it my duty to try to answer this question.

To begin with, let us admit there are only two general ways of bringing about a halt in the population increase: we might increase the death rate, or we might decrease the birth rate. (We might do both, but the two are independent and can be discussed separately.)

Let's start with the increase of the death rate first and consider all the variations on the theme:

A—Increase in the death rate

1—Natural increase

This is the system that has been in use for all species since life began. It is the system that served to limit human population throughout its history. When food grew scarce, human beings starved to death, were easier prey for disease in their famished condition, fought each other and killed in order to gain access to what food supplies there were, led armies into other regions where food was more plentiful. For all these reasons the death rate rose precipitously and population fell to match the food supply.

We have here the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse" (see the sixth chapter of the Biblical Book of Revelation)—war, civil strife, famine and pestilence.

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Modern science has greatly weakened the force of the third and fourth horsemen, and both famine and pestilence are not what they once were. This in itself has amazingly lowered the death rate from what it was in all the millennia before 1850 and is the major reason for the explosiveness with which population has increased since.

We can well imagine, however, that if the population continues to soar for another generation, the efforts of science will crack under the strain. All four horsemen will regain their ascendancy; the death rate will zoom upward.

Possibly one might be objective about this and say: Well, this is the way the game of life is played. The fittest will survive and mankind will continue stronger than ever, for the winnowing-out it has received.

Not at all! There might have been some validity to this view, for all its inhumanity, if mankind were armed with stone axes and spears, or even with machineguns and tanks. Unfortunately, we have nuclear weapons at our disposal and when the four horsemen start out on their horrid ride, the H-bombs will surely be used.

Mankind, living in the tattered remnants of a world torn by thermonuclear war, will *not* be stronger than ever. It will be living not only in the ruins of a destroyed technology, but in the midst of a dangerously poisoned soil, sea and atmosphere which may no longer be able to support vertebrate life at all.

We'll need something better.

2—*Directed general increase*

a—*Involuntary*

Instead of waiting for the course of events to enforce a catastrophic increase in death rate, we might blow off steam by randomly killing off part of the population from year to year. Suppose that preliminary estimates during a census year make it seem that the world population is ten percent above optimum. In that case, take the census and shoot every tenth person counted.*

About the only thing that can be said about this method is that it is perhaps a little better than a thermonuclear war. I don't think any sane man would consider it if any other alternative existed at all.

b—*Voluntary*

Random killing might be made voluntary if one constructed a suicide-centered society.** In such a society, suicide must be made to seem

*"*The Census Takers" by Frederik Pohl (F & SF, February 1956) actually uses this situation.*

**Gore Vidal's "Messiah" had something of this sort.*

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attractive, either through the effective promise of an afterlife or through the more material offer of financial benefits to the family left behind.

Somehow, though, I doubt that under any persuasion not involving physical constraint or emotional inhumanity, enough people will kill themselves to halt the population increase. Even if enough did, the kind of society that would place the accent on death with sufficient firmness to bring it about would undoubtedly be too unbearably morbid for the health of the species.

3—*Directed special increase*

a—*Inferiority*

But if we must kill, would it be possible to neutralize some of the horror by making murder serve some useful purpose. Suppose we kill off or (more humanely) sterilize that portion of the population that contributes least to mankind; the "inferior" portion, in other words.

Indeed, such a policy has been put into practice on numerous occasions, though not usually out of a set, reasoned-out population strategy. Throughout Earth's history, a conquering nation has usually made the calm assumption that its own people were superior to the conquered people, who were therefore killed or enslaved as a matter of course. Under conditions of famine, the conquered peasantry would surely die in greater proportion than the conquering aristocracy.

Conquerors varied in inhumanity. In ancient times, the Assyrians were most noted for the callous manner in which they would destroy the entire male population of captured cities; and in medieval times, the Mongols made a name for themselves in the same fashion. In modern times, the Germans under Hitler, more consciously and deliberately, set about destroying those whom they considered members of inferior races.

This policy can never be popular except with those who have the power and the inhumanity to declare themselves superior (and not usually with all of those either). The majority of mankind is bound to be among the conquered and the inferior, and their approval is not to be expected. The Assyrians, Mongols, and Nazis, were all greeted with nearly universal execration both in their own times and thereafter.

There are individuals whom the world generally would consider inferior—the congenital idiot, the psychopathic murderer, and so on—but the numbers of such people are too few to matter.

b—*Old age*

Perhaps then people can be killed off according to some category that isn't as subjective as superiority-inferiority. What about the very old?

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They still eat; they are still drains on the culture; yet they give back very little.

There have been cultures which killed those aged members of itself that could not carry their own weight (the Eskimos, for instance). Before late modern times, however, there was usually little pressure in this direction, since very few members of a society managed to live long enough to be too old to be worth their keep. Indeed, the very few aged members might even be valuable as the repositories of tradition and custom.

Not so nowadays. With the rise in life expectancy to 70, the "senior citizen" is far more numerous in absolute numbers and in proportion than ever before. Ought all those who reach 65, say, be painlessly killed? If this applies to all humans without exception there would be no subjective choice and no question of superiority-inferiority.

But what good would it do? The men and women thus killed are past the child-bearing age and have already done their damage. Such euthanasia will make the population younger but not do one thing to stop the population increase.

c—*Infants*

Then why not the other end of the age scale? Why not kill babies? Infanticide has been a common enough method of population control in primitive societies, and in some not so primitive. Usually, it is the girl babies that are allowed to die, and, to be sure, that is as it should be.

I hasten to say that I do not make the last statement out of anti-female animus. It is just that it is the female who is the bottleneck. Compare the female, producing 13 eggs a year and fertile for limited periods each month, with the male, producing millions of sperm each day and nearly continuously on tap. A hundred thousand women will produce the same number of babies a year whether there are ten thousand men at their free disposal or a million men.

Actually, there are some points in favor of infanticide. For one thing, it definitely works. Carried out with inhuman efficiency, it could put an end to the human race altogether in the space of a century. It can be argued, moreover, that a new-born baby is only minimally conscious and doesn't suffer the agonies of apprehension; that he as yet lacks personality and that no emotional ties have had a chance to form about him.

And yet, infanticide isn't pleasant. Babies are helpless and appealing and a society that can bring itself to slaughter them is perhaps too callous and inhumane to serve mankind generally. Besides, we cannot

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kill all babies, only some of them, and at once an element of choice enters. Which babies? The Spartans killed all those that didn't meet their standards of physical fitness, and in general the matter of superiority-inferiority enters with all its difficulties.

d—*Fetuses*

What about pre-birth infanticide—in short, abortion. Fetuses are not independently living, and society's conscience might be quieted by maintaining they are therefore not truly alive. They are not killed, they are merely "aborted," prevented from gaining full life.

Of all forms of raising the death rate, abortion would seem the least inhumane, the least abhorrent. At the present moment, in fact, there are movements all over the world, and not least in the United States, to legalize abortion.

And yet if one argues that killing a baby is not quite as bad as killing a grown man, and killing a fetus not quite as bad as killing a baby, why not go one step farther, and kill the fetus at the very earliest moment? Why not kill it before it has become a fetus, before conception has taken place?

It seems to me then that any humane person, considering all the various methods of raising the death rate must end by deciding that the best method is to prevent conception; that is, to lower the birth rate. Let's consider that next.

If we consider the different ways of decreasing the birth rate, we can see that, to begin with, they fall in two broad groups: voluntary and involuntary.

B—Decrease in birth rate

1—Voluntary

Ideally, this is the situation most acceptable to a humane person. If the population increase must be halted, let everyone agree to practice the limitation of children voluntarily.

Everyone might simply agree to have no more than two children. It would be one, then two, then STOP!

If this came to pass, not only would the population increase come to a halt* it would begin to decrease. After all, not all couples would have two children. Some, through choice or circumstance, would have only one child and some even none at all. Furthermore, of the babies that

**Provided the life expectancy doesn't increase drastically. If it did, there would be a continued accumulation of old people. It might be just as well not to labor to increase that expectancy above the level that now exists. It embarrasses me to say so but I see no way out.*

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were born, some would be bound to die before having a chance to become adults and have babies of their own.

With each generation under the two-baby system, then, the total population of mankind would decrease substantially.

I do not consider this a bad thing at all, for I feel that the Earth is already, at this moment, seriously overpopulated. I could argue and have, that a closer approach to the ideal population of Earth would be one billion people, and this goal would allow several generations shrinkage. In a rational society, without war or threat of war, it seems to me that a billion people could be supported indefinitely.

If the population threatened to drop below a billion, it would be the easiest thing in the world to raise the permitted number of babies to three per couple. Enough couples would undoubtedly take advantage of permission to have a third child to raise the population quickly.

I would anticipate that under a humane world government, a decennial census applied to the whole world would, on each occasion, serve to guide the decision whether, for the next ten years, third children would be asked for or not.

Such a system would work marvelously well, if it were adopted, but would it be? Would individuals limit births voluntarily? I am cynical enough to think not.

In the first place, where two is the desired number of babies per couple, it is so much easier to overshoot the mark than undershoot it. A particular couple can, without biological difficulty, have a dozen children, ten above par. No couple, however, no matter how conscientious, can have fewer than zero children, or two under par.

This means that for every socially-unfeeling couple with a dozen children, five couples must deprive themselves of children altogether to redress the balance.

Furthermore, I suspect that those families who, on a strictly voluntary basis, choose to have many children, are apt to be drawn from those with less social consciousness, less feeling of responsibility—for whatever reason. Each generation will contribute to the next generation in a most unbalanced fashion.

This would, in fact, very likely cause an utter breakdown in the voluntary system in short order, for there will be resentment and fear on the part of the socially conscious. The socially conscious will easily convince themselves that it is precisely the ignorant, the inferior, the undeserving who are breeding, and they may feel that it is important for them to supply the world with their own much-more-desirable offspring.

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It is even rather likely that, as long as birth control is purely voluntary, it will be negated out of local sub-planetary considerations.

In Canada, for instance, the birthrate is higher among the French-speaking portion of the population than among the English-speaking portion. I am sure that there are those on both sides of the fence who calculate, with hope or with fear, that the French-Canadians will eventually dominate the land out of sheer natural increase.

The French-Canadians might be loath to adopt voluntary birth control and lose the chance of domination, while the English-Canadians might be loath to adopt it and perhaps hand over the domination all the more quickly to a still-breeding French-Canadian population.

The situation might be similar within the United States where Blacks have a higher birthrate than Whites; or in Israel where the Arabs have a higher birthrate than the Jews; or in almost any country with a non-homogeneous population.

It is not only inside a country that such questions would arise. The Greeks would not want to fall too far behind the Bulgarians in population; the Belgians too far behind the Dutch; the Indians too far behind the Chinese; and so on and so on.

Each nation, each group within a nation, would watch its neighbors and would attempt to retain the upper hand for itself or (which is the same thing) prevent the neighbor from gaining the upper hand. And, in the name of patriotism, nationalism or racism, voluntary birth control would fail and mankind would be doomed.

2—*Involuntary*

Ought we then not merely ask couples not to have more than two children; ought we to *tell* them?

Suppose, for instance, that all babies were carefully registered and that every time a woman had a second baby, the first one being still alive, she would be routinely sterilized before being released from the hospital.

Why women? you might ask. Why not men, for whom the operation is simpler.

My choice of women is not the result of male chauvinism on my part* but only because women, as I said before, are the bottleneck in reproduction. Sterilizing some males will do no good if the rest merely work harder at it, while sterilizing females *must* force the birthrate down. Then, too, one knows when a female has two children; one can

*See, in my defense, UNCERTAIN, COY AND HARD TO PLEASE, F & SF, February 1969.

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only guess at it with males. Finally, it is the woman, not the man, who is on the hospital table at the time of birth.

But would such involuntary birth control work? Or would it arouse such resentment that the world would constantly rock with insurrection, that women would have their babies in secret, that the government would be forced into more extremes of tyranny constantly.

Somehow I suspect that the system would indeed break down if the process were not carried through without exception.

There would be a strong temptation, I suppose, to work out some sort of regulation whereby some people would be allowed three children or even four, while others might be allowed only one or even none at all. You might argue that college graduates ought to have more children than morons should; proven achievers more than idle dreamers; athletes more than diabetics and so on.

Unfortunately, I don't think that any graduated system, however impartially and sensibly carried through, can possibly succeed.

Whatever the arrangement there will be an outcry that group X is favored over group Y. At least group Y will say so and will gather information to prove that group X is in control of the World Population Council. Using the same statistics and information, group X will insist that group Y is being favored.

The only possible solution, however wasteful, would be to allow no exceptions at all for any reason. Let the "fit" have no more children than the "unfit" (no less, either), in whatever way your own emotions and prejudices happen to define "fit" and "unfit."

Then, when the population is reduced to the proper level and the Earth has had several generations of experience with a humane world government, propositions for grading birth numbers and improving the quality of humanity without increasing its quantity may be entertained.

Yet I must admit that the use of the knife; the inexorable push of governmental surgery is unpalatable to me and would probably be unpalatable to many people. If there were only some way to make voluntary compliance as surefire as the involuntariness of sterilization I would prefer that.

Could we leave people the choice; could we let them choose the additional child if they wish—but make it prohibitive for various reasons? Could we find pressures as inexorable as the knife, yet leaving the human body and, therefore, human dignity intact?

3—Voluntary, with encouragement

Let's go back to voluntary birth limitation, but now let's not make it

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entirely voluntary. Let's set up some stiff penalties for lack of cooperation.

To begin with, reverse the philosophy of the income tax. At present births are encouraged by income tax deductions. Suppose there are penalties instead. Your tax would go up slightly with one child, up again slightly with two, and then up prohibitively with three.

In other words, couples are bribed not to have children.

There are other forms of bribes. When a third child is born, a husband might suffer a pay cut, or lose his job altogether and be forced to go on welfare. A three-child family may lose medical plan privileges, be barred from airflight, be ostracized by other families.

This is all very cruel but in the world today that third child is a social felony.

Is that kind of pressure better than the knife? Will it force mankind less strongly into secret births, whole hidden colonies of forbidden children?

I don't know, but I can't think of anything better. It seems to me that the need is overwhelming and the time is now. Let's begin at once to pay people not to have babies, to begin building the social pressures against large families. It is that, or the death of civilization and of billions of human beings with it.*

Only one thing—

Suppose we adopt this final alternative, and suppose humanity generally and genuinely accepts it. People everywhere honestly intend to have no more than two children. Each couple which has its two children must now decide (without compulsory sterilization, mind you) to figure out a way not to have the third.

How? What alternatives are open to them?—For remember, if there are no reasonable alternatives, we are back to compulsory sterilization.—Or doom.

More on that next month.

In case your curiosity has grown unbearable, I myself have two children. I will have no more.

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The background of Neil Shapiro's latest story is similar to that of his IN BLACK OF MANY COLORS *(April 1970); that is, the protagonist is a beautiful telepath, a commander of the Institute of Worlds. Her first project is to accompany a starship on a run to a planet that has meant the end of the line for all but one of the last fifty ships to reach it.*

She Was the Music. The Music Was Him

by Neil Shapiro

VANESSA INSOUL WANTED A place to be alone, even though she knew she no longer had a right to such a thing. She belonged to the universe, but she had yet to grow accustomed to that fact. It had only been a short while, a few days, since she had been entitled to call herself a Commander of the Institute.

She had still to use—if the expression may be excused—her virgin powers, and she had not yet thought on the price she might one day be asked to pay for them.

She was tall, taller even than was usual in that age when height was being bred back into the race, and she was of magnificent proportions. Her eyes were of the darkest black, yet her hair was blonde. Her long blonde hair she wore so that it curved sinuously down along the lines of her shoulders and accented her movements as she walked. Her legs, tightly encased within the blue dress slacks of the Institute, were all you could rationally expect a woman's legs to be. And her face. When she smiled you would swear she was laughing, and when she laughed you could forget the joke.

She looked her part and she was to play it well. But she was still unsure, she was still untried, and every now and then she would laughingly smile at herself when she thought of how young she really was.

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Walking along, immersed in her own thoughts and fears, she continued down the Street of Times which wove its frivolous way from the doors of the Institute to the silvery fields of the Starport of Earth.

Here, at the beginning of the Street, the lights of old neon signs reflected off her golden tunic in a kaleidoscopic display, but she continued on, paying little attention to the ancient amusements they offered her. As she came to the end of that time-section, a small, nearly humanoid alien plucked at the hem of her tunic. She stopped and regarded him calmly.

"Do you play VIBGYOR?" he asked her in a voice which was surprisingly low pitched for the creature's size.

"I've played it before," she answered. The alien thrust a small card into her hand.

"The address," he said, "of the finest color palace within this spiral arm."

She glanced down at the card she had been handed, and when she looked up, the alien had vanished into the crowds along the Street.

The building she was standing in front of disgorged a mob of fun-seekers. The group, of fifty or so, jostled her as they reeled by, singing old songs and breathing the fumes of ancient drinks into her face. For a moment Vanessa was tempted to join their group, such was the etiquette of the Street of Times. Everyone was partying, and friends were the strangers of a second ago.

The card pressed gently against the palm of her hand, signaling her in what direction was the VIBGYOR game. She could always return to this section later, she thought, and cupping the directo-card in her hands, she allowed it to guide her down the Street.

In a few moments of walking, the neon signs gave way to the bright flickering of Retina-lights, as messages and the exhortations of entrepreneurs fell on her optic nerves, by-passing her pupils and her own volition. She allowed herself to become lost in the sights and sounds which played both around and within her. She passed a *yaz* parlor, and for a moment she was debating whether to enter and taste the drink of eternal love. But the card continued to direct her onwards, and she decided to follow it.

Soon the messages to sample, to taste, to try, to smell, to eat, to drink, to breathe, to love were being impressed directly onto the cortex of her brain, and she knew she was nearing the more recent Times of the Street.

The card lay quietly in her hands. She opened her eyes and found that she was, indeed, within a VIBGYOR game room, the finest she had ever seen.

It was an oval room, a hundred

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feet along the longer axis and fifty feet wide. A gate prevented her from walking directly into the oval's center, the floor of which seemed to be of black velvet. There was a railing which ran around the perimeter of the oval room, and she walked in the corridor it formed between the walls and the playing area.

She came to a rather short woman seated at a red console. The woman smiled at her, and Vanessa mechanically returned the greeting.

A hundred feet more along the corridor a man was seated comfortably at a blue console. He was tall, even taller than herself, and she noticed he was also quite handsome.

"Will you be playing Violet?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, "that was the color on my card."

"Well," he smiled, "you were certainly worth waiting for. The Violet controls are at the next console. May your color be triumphant."

"May yours," she replied.

She walked further along and seated herself at a violet console. She placed her hand on the betting surface, and the console's screen lit to show her a truly astronomical figure. But then she remembered that the last thing she need worry for were credits. She shrugged and lightly moved her fingertips on all the controls to show that she would match the stakes. The console hummed beneath her hands and she looked over the rail out onto the playing area.

Ten feet out from the rail, equidistantly around the oval, the game colors were positioned at their starting points. The colors were in their globular, at rest, positions. It appeared as if they were seven differently colored glass spheres suspended a foot above the black, almost invisible, floor. Her own Violet was positioned between Blue and Red, the others—Indigo, Green, Yellow and Orange—were also hovering about.

Her board buzzed and the controls came alive. She felt her worries leave her as her concentration moved out onto the field.

The Blue globe lengthened along one axis and stretched itself towards the Orange. Defensively, Orange withdrew its central portion so that its shape was that of a blood corpuscle; the player had saved his color from Blue's first move, but Vanessa saw an opening for herself. With lightning speed she crashed her Violet into the thin outer edge of the Orange shape. When her spheroid withdrew, the Orange was of much smaller volume. She had scored heavily on it.

Across the oval she saw Indigo and Green had formed one of the temporary, fleeting alliances of the game. They were speedily crossing

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the center, circling about each other in a complex three-dimensional pattern, a strongly defensive formation which also sacrificed no offensive capabilities.

She saw also that the Red was now circling off to the side of her Violet, in an attempt to join the Indigo-Green alliance and to spearhead an attack on her own sphere.

The Green-Indigo combination prevented her from shooting her Violet into the center away from the threatening Red, and if she lost time eluding the Red, then the Green-Indigo would engulf her color and likely would totally erase it.

She decided on one nearly hopeless strategy. She formed Violet into two small spheres linked by a bar of the color. One of the linked spheres she sent to meet the oncoming alliance and left the other sphere to meet the Red. But Red saw through her maneuver and headed directly for the weak bar connecting her two spheres. If that bar was snapped, her color would be erased.

She frantically threw the controls to form again the defensive sphere, but she knew the Red would reach her first. Suddenly, the Blue globe appeared and began to weave itself along and around the exposed Violet bar. She glanced down the corridor to her right. The Blue player, the man who had spoken to her, waved at her and returned his attention to his console.

With the Blue giving her cover she whipped her Violet into a complex network of threads. As she formed a sphere from the color threads, she caused it to revolve so quickly that its surface appeared smooth; it was a devious ploy she had once seen a champion player use.

Indigo-Green, confident now, swept to meet her in the center of the field. When the three spheres were nearly touching—her own positioned between the other two—she abruptly halted the rotation of her Violet sphere. The energy threads swung out wildly like a thousand bolos and wrapped themselves about each of the opposing spheres. There was no defense; too much of their surface area had been violated. The Green and the Indigo both were erased. Her own Violet floated alone in the middle of the playing field, she returned it to the defensive sphere form.

Giving her attention now to the other side of the field, she saw that only the Blue and her Violet were left.

The Blue coruscated violently and formed a towering wall-like structure. It moved in this configuration along the field, and her Violet gave ground before it. She had never seen that particular strategy before and was confused by it. Hence, she did not react

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swiftly enough. The Blue totally engulfed her Violet, and her color was erased.

Her console went silent. A small slot appeared and she placed her thumbnail, where she had had her credit rating recorded, into it so that the proper number of credits could be deducted from her, or rather, the Institute's account.

The Blue player stood behind her.

"A good game," he said and smiled at her.

"I suppose so," she said. "It's been some time since I've last played. I appreciated your help at the beginning."

"Somehow," he said, "I wish my color had not been the triumphant one. It seems so ungallant of me."

She had still to see more than one of the Street's establishments, she thought, wondering how to answer him. Besides she knew she could protect herself. She shuddered a bit when she thought of just how *well* she could.

"My name is Samuel," he said. Yes, she thought, he was definitely attractive. "Will you join with me on the Street tonight," he continued, "and help me to spend my winnings?"

"All right," she answered, "later you can explain to me how you formed that wall."

He laughed and reached for her hand which she let him take.

"Who knows," he said almost seriously, "we may find our own Time and our own desires."

"You've yet to tell me your name," Samuel said while swirling his glass of pale gold liquor from side to side as the accompanying instruction sheet had recommended.

"I may not like my name," Vanessa said, "or perhaps I've forgotten it. I might never have had one."

Strange, she thought, that there should have been those warnings printed on the vendbot. The next drink would be her fourth, and three was supposed to be as many as one should take. But it did taste good and the color was warm.

"You are Vanessa Insoul," Samuel stated, "or rather, Commander Insoul of the Institute of Worlds." He drained the liquor from his own glass and set the empty container back on the antique bar.

His eyes seemed locked on her own and she found that she didn't wish to look away.

"How did you know?"

"Why shouldn't I? It isn't everyday the Institute releases the news of another Commander, especially one they refer to as being 'beautiful.' "

He signaled for another drink and the vendbot rolled up from the other end of the bar. As it placed two more drinks before them, a small red light began to blink in the middle of its cad-

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mium forehead. It asked in its small, piping voice, if they didn't, think they had had enough? The ancient beverages, it warned, could not be taken lightly.

In answer to it, Samuel quaffed the new drink in one long swallow and replaced the emptied glass. Vendbots, as a rule, lack the necessary appurtenances to appear astonished, but this one came as close to it as was possible.

"I once lived for a month," he explained to the mechanism, "on a world whose atmosphere contained more than a trace of C_2H_5OH. On another world than that, which lies under a hotter sun, I once smoked a root which imparts forgetfulness, and at times I can still remember it. Don't ever suggest to me that I might have had enough of anything. Bring me another." Apologetically, the robot scurried off to refill his glass.

"Then, you're a starship Captain?" Vanessa asked him.

"Yes." He frowned at something or other, and for a moment Vanessa found herself hoping that he would smile again.

"I'm sorry," he continued, "perhaps I had better leave you now. You must have many things to do, Commander, and I am only a Captain who belongs to no world and certainly not to all of them."

"No, stay. Please. I'm not on assignment now. I won't be for another year yet, this is my Novitiate Leave."

"What's it like?" he asked. "Judge, jury and executioner. All of that coupled with beauty is almost arcane."

She felt wary of him suddenly. He should have feared her, that would have been the normal thing. Commanders could not find friendship easily, and their first duty was to suspect it.

But the drinks had been warm and good. She felt as if she actually was in the Twenty-First Century, back when the Institute wasn't quite all-powerful, when there were as yet no Commanders. A thousand years ago, when she could have been his lover and never thought twice about the risks.

"I'll show you," she said. She laughed and set her glass down, a trifle unsteadily. "I'll show you what it's like."

She reached across the bar and pulled his empty glass across to her. Time seemed to slow for her as she concentrated on that glass. Her mind flowed down the pathway it had been trained to, and connected with the source of her powers.

Deep, deep down under the Institute raged the most awesome force ever generated by mankind. More than the fusioning energies of a billion suns, controlled to be uncontrollable, contained by its own warped forces. Her mind sought it out and merged with it.

A Matrix of Chaos. All the

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energy patterns that ever were, tangled and knotted together in a skein of power. She viewed the atoms combining and traced energies of their reactions.

She no longer saw Samuel; he was no longer a part of her world; her world was only that encompassed and contained in the Chaos Matrix of the Institute, and that was more than the universe.

Somewhere there was one pattern she could use for what she was planning. By instinct, intuition, training, she found that one. She memorized its effects on the space around it and knew it was one more pattern she could find in the future.

She allowed half her consciousness to remain enmeshed in the Matrix and the other half she returned to the glass and the space around it. Then her mind began to bend and warp that space to match it to that of the pattern. She changed certain convolutions, different foldings. She was an artist in that medium.

The glass glowed red, then white. The sides of it flowed, molten, bent and formed the shapes she commanded.

It was done, she returned all of herself to Samuel's world. In front of her the glass stood reshaped, or rather, there was no longer a glass there. Now on the bar was a small and intricately wrought glass model of a starship, poised on the walnut surface in a translucent loveliness. It looked for all the world as if it belonged in a universe where the stars were tiny glass balls.

Samuel reached for it. His hand hovered just above it, and then he returned his arm to his side, his expression one of awe and disbelief.

"It's no longer hot," she said. "It never was really. It just . . . I just made it think it was. I made it for you. A starship for a starship Captain. I thought it would be appropriate."

He lifted it gently from the bar.

"It left no burn," he said. He held it up to the light, admiring the reflections that glittered along its sculptured sides.

"That would have been sloppy," Vanessa said. "The Institute trained me better than that. Whatever else a Commander may be, she is never sloppy. In anything."

"You're confident," Samuel told her. "I think I like that. I think it makes you more human."

The old stories have it that if you traveled down the Street of Times, from one recreated era into the next, and if you had patronized each establishment along the way, then your frolicsome journey would have taken a hundred years. But it was also said that if you spent your time wisely, then in one night on the Street you could live a thousand hundred years.

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HIM

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shiny ranks separating to
clear passages through whic
two could walk.
There was a room, much l
any other room. But afterwards
they always referred to it as their
room. There in simple harmony,
then made love together.
To the proprietor of the place it
seemed a bit of a shame that they
were so obviously, fanatically in-
volved in each other. Their room
had an attachment for the cascad-
ing night-effect,
but they covered themselves only
with night. They could have had
any of a million illusions. They
could have made love under the
fourteen crystal moons of Mira, or
ought they were under the blue
s of Earth. Instead they settled
ir room.
me," Vanessa said, coiled
him on the bed in their
re will you be going af-
the Street?"
ow," he replied. "I
the coordinates of
ot its name. No
travel, no mat-
r of the star,
re where it
or what
not even
did it

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for the credits." He laughed and pulled her closer to him, but his voice sounded sad to her. Outside his voice had been always happy—as her's had been. The contrast unsettled her.

"Do you need credits that badly?" she asked.

"No more than anyone does, but let's talk now about you." Once more that note of charming happiness was back. "It's not every day one gets a chance to talk with a Commander. Tell me, my beautiful, soft and warm Vanessa of the Institute, where will *you* be traveling next?"

"I don't know either." She laughed, "Somewhere, anywhere. The universe is mine for an entire year." Her voice became mockingly serious. "I am a Novitiate, and as such this year it is my duty to familiarize myself as widely as possible and firsthand with a portion of the many people of the Institute worlds, in order that in the years to come I may better serve them."

"It sounds dull," he said, "but in a rather exciting way."

They made love again and afterwards they returned to their conversation.

"I think," she said, "that you will be my first project." Supporting her young body over him, she kissed him and said, "The Institute will never miss a small sum. Whatever a Commander does is automatically considered to be for the best of all the worlds. I think it would be good for them to be serviced by a fleet of new starships. Your ships."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but if I accepted those ships, then I would have to devote my life to serving all those other people. Otherwise I would be proving a Commander could err, and then what would happen? Besides, I will make more than enough on this next run. Even more than usual."

"Why?" she asked, teasing him and gently pulling his hair. "Because you're the bravest and best star Captain in the universe?"

"All those reasons," he smiled, "and more."

"It's dangerous, isn't it?" she asked, suddenly frightened for him, but sure that he would deny her fears.

"Yes," he said, "it is. Only one starship out of the past fifty has completed its run to that world." His voice broke off just for a second, and he stroked his fingers lightly along her back. She felt how cold his hands had become. "The one which returned," he said, "brought back only a mad, gibbering man who had once been her Captain. No one knows if he can see, or hear, or even think any longer. But he hums occasionally, an insane music all his own; and when he hums, he cries.

"That world desperately needs medical supplies. They can ration their food, and their industries can be temporarily slowed—but

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they need these medicines as soon as possible. The Institute has placed them on a number-two priority, but even so it may be some time before the trouble is located and stopped. They need the medicines as soon as possible. They've hired me to make it sooner. If I make it they'll pay me well. So well that I may be able to buy my own fleet of ships, with my own credits."

"I am going with you." Her gaze locked with his in soft but steadfast determination.

"I told you. It will be dangerous, perhaps." He ran a hand lightly along a strand of her hair. "I couldn't allow you to."

"I think I can protect myself."

While she said that, her mind sprang towards the Matrix and found one certain pattern. One of the bronze spheres tipping the ancient bedposts glowed, melted and coalesced into a tiny statue of two people entwined in love on an old-fashioned bed.

"I guess you can," he said and kissed her. Then he broke off the kiss and began laughing so loudly that Vanessa felt nearly offended.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he answered still laughing, "nothing at all. It's Vanessa of the Institute and Samuel of the Stars facing all dangers. But let's not press our luck. We'd better get out of here before the proprietor sees what you've done to one of his antique and costly furnishings." He pointed at the small statue tipping the bedpost. "I'd hate to hear what he'll have to say about that."

Perhaps fortunately they never learned.

The voyage, the first part of it, might be described as uneventful, if one wishes to speak in cosmic terms wherein any events must shake worlds or destroy peoples.

But to Samuel and Vanessa it was quite full of interesting, exciting things. To Vanessa the ship was a wonder, exceeded only by the warped, spinning, kaleidoscopic images of the stars they traveled among.

And Samuel, well, Samuel had Vanessa with him. The first time you share the stars with someone is also a memorable time.

They were sitting in the ship's lounge together, in the transparent nose of the ship. There the stars shine through a starship's hull in all of their warped and distorted beauty, cascading their multihued light from wall to wall. Few things are as beautiful as the stars from that vantage point, and few people ever see them thus.

"I remember," Samuel was saying, "the first time I saw these stars. It's one of my first memories. I had asked my father who my mother had been, and he didn't answer me immediately. Instead, a few days later, he took me to the lounge of our ship."

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"What happened?" Vanessa asked sleepily, her eyes reflecting all the colors of the stars.

"He took me to the lounge and sat us down in the very center so that there were windows all around us. Then he told me that the stars were my mother and that they were all I would ever need. He told me they were the only things worth loving, and the only thing worth a man's hate. He said that if I stayed with them I would never need anything else, nor want it either. Then he left. I stayed there for the rest of the shipday, watching and trying to make sense out of the stars. I find, as I get older, that I understand him more now. But I still don't understand the stars. Yet I could picture myself saying those things, and if I did, I would mean them."

"I think I understand a little of what he meant," Vanessa said, "that if you stayed out here long enough, and returned often enough, you could get to know these stars. They are so numerous, so colorful, yet there is always an undercurrent of evil about them." Her voice trailed off as she gazed out to the stars spinning in their silence.

"And what was your father like?" Samuel asked and smiled, placing his arm gently around her shoulder. "For that matter, where did you grow up? I had the stars, for what that's worth. What did you have?"

"I don't know. I no longer have those memories. Commanders are not allowed them; they are erased."

"That seems cruel," Samuel said. He tightened his arm around her. "It is cruel. I had no idea, I'm sorry. Shall we talk further about the stars?"

"No, it's all right." She smiled, but he could tell it was a forced expression. "It no longer bothers me. I understand the reason for it. This way I have no favoritism for any one world. I belong wholly to the Institute, to every world, every people. To serve them all equally, perhaps in ways that do not seem humanitarian. You know?" she laughed a bit shrilly. "I do sometimes wish they had left me my name, my own name. There have been two hundred and twenty Vanessa Insouls before me, and there will probably be a thousand more. I've heard stories about the one preceding me. They say that she was a cruel person. She was just, but she had no mercy. Yet they also say she was one of the Institute's finest and that it is an honor for me to carry on the name. Do you think I could be cruel, Samuel?"

"No," he said, "I can't picture you being so."

"That's why I am afraid. I've got to learn how to be cruel. Someday I may need it."

"Don't ever be afraid," he said, "as long as you have the stars." He

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waved his free arm across the room gesturing out at the universe. "Listen to the right ones and ignore the others. You can't go wrong."

"Not with you," she whispered.

"Not with the stars," he said.

Chart a new star, then give it a number. Place that number in a large book of numbers. Correlate it with still more figures and feed it into the ship's computer. With luck you'll arrive there. Then, leave for another number.

But no one ever names them, not unless they live there.

They were heading towards star 56-098 in the region of coordinate 678/250. They never bothered to learn its name. Why bother?

Just past halfway to their destination, it began to end for them. It might have been worse. Vanessa might not ever have met Samuel; nor him, her. One may wonder which they would have chosen had they known how things would turn out. It makes for interesting speculation.

"There's trouble," Samuel informed her, turning away from the banked rows of ship's controls and readouts.

"What?"

"I don't know. The ship is no longer heading properly. At this rate of deviation we will miss the primary coordinate entirely. I don't see how this is possible. I've never heard of this happening before. There is only one way it could happen, but that way isn't possible. That would be if someone else were controlling us. But we are at present in contact with no other space continuum than the one our own ship creates around us."

"But, someone else is controlling our ship?"

He shrugged. "Someone is controlling us."

"What do we do about it?"

"We can wait and see where we're being taken."

"Samuel, please excuse me. I'll go to my cabin. There might be something I can do to help us, but I had better be left alone."

"Wait," he said taking hold of one of her hands. "I want you to know something."

"There's no need," she said placing her other hand on top of his. "I already know."

There may have been a small tear that trickled down one of her cheeks as she left the bridge, but by the time she reached her cabin she was again fully in control of herself. She was Vanessa Insoul, latest to bear that name. She had not yet learned to be cruel, but she was still a formidable opponent. She was the best the universe had to offer.

Under certain circumstances.

She lay back on her bunk and closed her eyes, attuning her mind to the far-distant underground of

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the Institute, not noticing or being affected by the distance between the Matrix and herself. In many ways she was a part of that Matrix, and could not be separated from it. She searched the Matrix for the pattern she needed.

One for observation. She found it and applied it.

Around the ship, a pattern of alien force. Warping ship's space to its own purposes and direction. She could read it as to its purpose, but understanding of it escaped her. To see a thing working is one thing; to understand it is a specialty.

Then she took another pattern from the Matrix and kneaded the space-time continuum into an unnatural knot; following the convolutions, she attempted to trace one thread back to its source, to the place which bent and twisted her ship's own space. But she became lost in the foldings and windings, so badly lost that for a moment she feared she would never find her way back, and that her body would live for a thousand years not having to spend the excess energy of supporting a mind. She won one by conceding the other; she doubled back along her trail and cowered in the safety behind her closed eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said to Samuel, back on the bridge, "I tried, but I don't know anything more than before. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't even understand them. There may be something I can do later," but her voice was unsure.

Samuel nodded, as if he hadn't heard her. He threw a switch on one of the control boards. The vision screen, which covered one wall of the bridge, lit up to show the stars and filtered out the warping effect of ship's space. Vanessa saw nothing out of the usual.

"What is it?" she asked, puzzled.

"There," he said, pointing to the lower right-hand quadrant, "there. Where space is blacker than anywhere else, where the stars seem too bright. That area where everything seems too normal, too clean. I think that's their ship. They're stopping us from seeing it, but they're doing it too well."

"Make love to me." A note of desperation in her voice. "Now. While I'm still just Vanessa Insoul. Later will be too late. We'll either be dead or I may be too cruel to love."

He pulled her closer to him, and they seemed to be framed by the view screen and it's too normal space.

"Then I hope we both die," he said. "I hope it'll be painless, but I wouldn't quibble, not at that choice."

They began to make love and did not notice how soon the entire screen was too right, too normal, too close.

They ignored it. There were more important things.

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She awakened, and for a moment she thought that she was in an artistic conception of Hell, that she had fallen into an engraving out of Dante. A dozen women lay supine and unclothed, asprawl on a rock-strewn dirt floor. Their bodies were streaked with stains, their hair was long and unkempt, and their breathing was irregular, gasping and so soft that the first impression they gave was of death.

Vanessa rose to her feet, hardly noticing her own nakedness.

"My name is Vanessa Insoul," she stated clearly and loudly, "of the Institute. I request your cooperation."

It was only a formality and she was not perturbed at the lack of any response. She knelt by one woman who would have been a curvaceous brunette if she had had fifty more pounds of flesh on her frame. The girl's eyes were open, but they regarded Vanessa either unseeingly or uncaringly; the effect was the same.

"Where is this place?" Vanessa asked her calmly. "What is happening?"

The brunette rolled her body so that she was facing away from Vanessa. She curled into a fetal position.

"You will find out soon enough, now." A different woman spoke. This one half-lay with her back propped against one of the cave's rough walls, her legs splayed out in front of her. Her voice was not sarcastic, but was hopelessly sad.

"What is happening here?" Vanessa said gently. "I may be able to help you. I should be able to help you."

"Help yourself then," the woman advised her. "I no longer care. Do you know," she said, her voice changing to nearly a normal conversational tone, "once, a million years ago, I was a Princess? A real Princess. Oh, it was a small enough world and it wasn't worth very much. But someday they would have made me Queen. Yesterday would have been the proper day for my coronation, I think. They would have loved me then."

"You're talking nonsense," Vanessa said, now not quite so gently, "even if you are a Princess—and I recall one who vanished a week ago, which is hardly a million years—you must answer me clearly. I am a Commander of the Institute, if necessary I can order your home world irradiated, and then they would have no time for Princesses."

"It's too late. You're too late," the Princess said sullenly. "But it doesn't matter. I won't hold it against you."

She began to hum, but it was not a happy sound. It was not melodious, yet Vanessa found herself wondering if perhaps it was disharmony in her mind, not in the sound. The distraught woman was trying to press herself deep, deep into the rocks beside her. There

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was fear on her face, but there was another emotion there. Was it ecstasy—or desire? Either had no place being mirrored with fear.

Vanessa saw a change come over the air separating them, an almost unnoticeable thing. It was becoming too clear, too normal, and she noticed that the odors of the cave were heightened and the light seemed more intense.

"Look through the bars," the Princess said wildly. "Look, try to save me, try to save yourself. But you can't, you can't. I would have made a kind Queen."

Then she vanished. No flash of light, no fireworks, no strange noises or signs. A few loose pebbles fell from the wall. The only sound left was the breathing of the other women and Vanessa's own gasp.

Vanessa turned around and her face was illuminated by a shaft of light that was piercing the dimness of the cave. There was an exit before her, barred by something which appeared to be an iron portcullis. There had been only a blank wall there before.

Stepping over the prostrate forms between her and the light, she peered out between the iron bars. The sky was blue—sky-blue; the clouds were white—cloud-white. It looked as if the world outside was within nine nines of Earth-normal.

Almost unconsciously she contacted with the Matrix and applied an elementary pattern to the bars. They did not glow, melt, bend or form small statues of lovers or starships. They remained bars, they imprisoned her.

She knew they must be an illusion. If they had been made of the strongest molecularly stressed material in the universe, they could not have stood up to her. But she could not destroy an illusion, most especially if she did not know where reality was.

The green lawn outside was triangularly shaped and was situated in the middle of a rock plain which stretched out to hills bordering the valley it was within. Situated in the far angle of the triangle was a large obsidian boulder, the top of which had been planed smooth in contrast to its fractured sides.

A woman was crouched on the boulder; her head rested on her knees, and her long hair hung down to all sides of the rock. It was the woman who had called herself a Princess, Vanessa saw.

Then Vanessa noticed a strangeness about the valley. Around all sides of the grassy triangle there was a feeling and a look of *rightness*. It was as if she had never seen anything before except through a pane of not quite clear glass, and that now the glass had been removed.

The woman, the Princess, stood up straight suddenly. The muscles of her lean body tensed and be-

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came outlined beneath her tight flesh. A ripple passed through the air, distorting the scene as if there were fires raging beneath the mouth of the cave where Vanessa watched from.

The woman seemed to be screaming, but the scene lacked sound.

Once more Vanessa attempted to apply a pattern of force, but she could not break through that barrier separating her from the other woman. An illusion it might have been, but in some ways it was far stronger than that.

Across the valley she saw another cave entrance, also barred. She couldn't be certain, but she thought that she could see Samuel pressed up against the other side of his own prison gate.

A wave of relief passed through her. He was safe then, or at least as safe as she. She allowed her attention to return to the altar-like boulder.

The woman appeared to convulse; she teetered precariously for a second on the edge of the boulder top and then fell heavily to the ground.

Vanessa uttered a harsh cry and stood back from the gate which had returned to its appearance of a blank, cave wall. She turned, and the woman she had been watching was again back inside the cave. She lay stretched out, her face in the dirt, her arms outstretched on either side of her.

Vanessa knelt by her; she gently turned the woman's body over and cradled her head in her arms. The woman's eyes flickered briefly open, but only the whites were visible.

She spoke. She spoke in the voice of a person realizing that she has only an instant of sanity left, and that even that one instant may be warped.

"Music," she said. "I suppose it was very beautiful. All Princesses are beautiful when they sing."

She would not speak again, and Vanessa left her to lie on the cave floor. One more body, one more set of soft, gasping, breathing noises.

Vanessa thought and concentrated, and still did not understand. She felt vaguely frightened, a personal fright, one of immediacy, but she could not quite pin down where she felt the threat to be coming from.

She looked up, straight into a patch of clear—perfectly clear—air. She screamed.

Even as she screamed she felt something like sleep, but blacker and deeper overtake her; she remembered she had last felt it on the ship, and then she had awakened in the cave.

The blackness took her in. It could have been an instant or a million years before it left her. But it did, finally.

She opened her eyes; the light hurt them and for a while she was

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blinded. But she knew where she was, what she was doing. She was kneeling on a cold, hard surface. There was a breeze lightly moving through her hair. She was on the black boulder, the black altar.

Her eyes focused as her pupils contracted.

She no sooner was able to take in the green triangular lawn around her and to note that the hillsides seemed free of both caves and gates, than it began.

There was danger all around her. A laughing, drooling, horrible, unhuman danger. It had teeth and fangs, and thing worse than those. It came on the legs of a baboon and had the soul of a vulture, and she could hear its hyena laugh. It was right behind her! She would turn to face it, to fight as best she could. She would drive her slim, breakable nails into its unyielding granite eyes.

She was paralyzed. It was behind her, and it was coming closer, and she could only feel FEAR. Blinding horror gripped her. Already she could feel its shiny, knife-edged claws dripping deep into her vitals, tearing the womb from her cradling bowels, and dropping it at her feet.

Fear(fear)Fear, every cell of her body sang it, every part of her mind screamed it. Fear(fear)Fear.

But she was Vanessa Insoul, and she could be terrified, she could be fearing, but she would not allow herself to be defeated.

The Matrix. Where was it? (Fear fogged her mind.) The first pattern, apply it. Nothing. Nothing to burn, nothing to cause to run in screaming pain from its victim, nothing but illusion. Nothing behind her, but a fear inside that was more powerful than she had ever known.

With a mind-wrenching effort she brought her eyes down from the sky and looked across the sward. In front of her and surrounding her was a vast, deep sea of clearness. So pure, so transparent, it had to be unreal. Occasionally a ripple of distortion passed through it so that the very hills of the valley seemed to shake.

Fear(fear)Fear.

Once more she reached into the Matrix. That Chaos-weave held every pattern in the universe within it. There must be one design she could use. There was one. It seemed right; intuitively she recognized it and reached for it. She memorized it, and her mind duplicated it around her.

Like a filter on a lens can change a sky from blue to orange, the pattern she imposed between her and *them* allowed her to see the valley as it was in some ways, but had not been to her before.

She could see now in ways no one had known before. There was a myriad of tiny scarlet eyes watching her from a brown mist surrounding her. Tiny eyes, greedy eyes, appreciative eyes.

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The fear built to a blinding crescendo within her, and her filtered vision showed her what was real, but outside her own reality.

Translucent, shimmering, blue spheres of mist seeped from her soul and poured through her skin. They hovered in the air about her, supported by the brown mist which was exuded by the eyes.

The fear was being controlled as a master controls the keyboard of an organ. It was deep and vibrant and at times a pianissimo twinge, at others a fortissimo surge. It built to louder tones and shivered her mind. The blue spheres were of deeper color now and began to dance about her. And the eyes, the eyes were not watching her. They watched the Blues. They watched her blue fear dancing.

It was changing, the rhythm was changing.

(Love?)

Like a mythical bird, lovely and small, fleeting and calling. She would have preferred the fear. The fear she might have fought, but this, this was . . .

. . . . More painful now. Getting stronger. Love(love)Love. Almost within her grasp, she reached out for it, knowing it would burn her. She willed herself to it, ready to give, ready to take, ready to die.

Love(love)Love.

Red spheres, life essence, flowed out of her and weaved around the dancing Blues. And the greedy eyes widened madly.

She had to fight, no matter what she willed. She had been trained too well, too long, not to fight.

As her mind was racked with varying emotions (some cool, some hot, all harsh and tearing), she found an awareness of what was being done to her, with her. It was not a revelation, or a guess; it was one more note of horror to add to the crashing emotions.

The eyes, the energy beings. They were weaving her emotions into a tapestry of their own. By following one pattern of the Matrix, she was able to see her own emotions on the energy level of the watchers. Yet in a way it was false. The colors, the movements were only the way she could comprehend what the energy ones "saw."

Why? the question came from her mind and echoed back and forth within her skull, and was answered. Not in words, or in symbols. It was just a feeling she had, but she knew it was her answer.

Music. Crashing crescendos. Fear, building, building, building, like sixteenth notes in a glissade. Tiny, vibrating pianissimo notes of love. Blending, harmonizing within a fortissimo horror. Interwoven in five-four time. A metronome beating in her soul, ticking away her life and her sanity. Nine

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million notes on a million scales. Music, music, more, more, never enough, wonderful to hear, wonderful to feel, wonderful to entwine one's energy with the notes of Vanessa.

She was a keyboard, her mind the strings. But she would fight them. She would have to. She was Vanessa Insoul and, if necessary, she could be cruel.

She fought, and for a time it looked as though she might win. The Institute would have been proud of her, at the beginning. But she was Vanessa Insoul and had her own sort of style.

She tried to control her emotions, to inject her own notes, her own melodies into the alien symphony. She hoped to raise a disharmony, a jarring, unlovely noise that might set her free.

(Hate) they told her, because they needed that note. Images came to her unbidden. The Institute, a childhood that might never have been, that was gone for ever. The stars, cold and laughing, demanding her to serve, giving nothing in return.

New black globes joined the dancing ones around her.

She fought back.

(Samuel) her own thought. Small, bronze statue of lovers. Drinks that made the mind spin on the Street of Times. One certain room. Their room. Samuel.

Softly violet globes, gentle ectoplasm engulfed the Blacks. The Blacks fled screaming, coalescing, dissolving before her onslaught as she attacked false hatred with her love, her own love, her real love. The harmony shattered, and a scream was in her mind, a scream of outrage, a sigh, a hating thought.

More Violet flowed from her soul; she formed it into a wall on all sides of her so that the Blacks could not penetrate. One Black touched her wall and was erased, an analogue of music she couldn't hear as it was being destroyed.

Fear(fear)Fear.

The monster was back, still close behind her. It was gaining more swiftly now. She could feel its breath, like liquid ice, along her back. Its claws were out and its bones clanked together as it stalked her.

The Blues of fear attacked her wall, and the wall cracked and dissolved. The eyes were tiny slits of ecstasy gone mad.

(The Room) she flung that thought at the stalking fear-madness as if it were a spear. Samuel, there in the room. Security, warmth. Arms about her, protecting her. Nothing in the world to fear, there never was.

Orange spirals flowed around the Blues and the Blacks, and slowly they ceased to be. Once more, like a curse, an alien frustration came to her.

Her mind was clear, she was

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herself again. She was still paralyzed, but her emotions were her own.

The air around her rippled madly, as if a million flames were passing through it. Then, as if he had always been there, Samuel was beside her on the boulder top. He stood, rigid, by her side. She tried to touch him, to be touched by him, but she couldn't move.

Samuel fell to his knees and tears coursed down his cheeks, his mouth pulled tightly back along the line of his teeth. The air in front of the altar was quiet, and in the other way of sight she saw the eyes, quiescent now—watching.

She couldn't reach him. He couldn't turn his own head; he didn't even know that she was there. And how could he fight them, not knowing what was happening? He would be their music until they drained him of his life or of his sanity.

Now he lay face down on the cold, obsidian rock. His fists were clenched so tightly that rivulets of blood flowed from his palms and formed small scarlet pools that glistened in the sunlight.

Around him she could see the huge globes of Blue and Red weaving about each other in slow formation dance. They dipped and swirled, leaving colorful streamers behind them. Their colors grew deeper and finer; the eyes watched maniacally from the brown mist.

Fortissimo, building, climaxing.

Now he was laughing. Harder, harder, harder. His mouth opened so widely that skin cracked and more blood trickled into the pool.

Green colors joined the others in a minor chord.

Frantically she plunged her mind, all of her mind, into the Chaos Matrix. The patterns swirled around her, and she feared she would be lost in them. But somewhere she knew there must be one she could use to save Samuel and herself. The Matrix now covered her completely in itself; she felt as if she had swum into an underground cave. She knew that she was lost then, lost in the Chaos.

There, a tiny thread of a pattern. Find it, hold it. So dark, so lost. Somewhere, where's the rest? Like untangling a giant skein of yarn for one thread, for one small fiber of that thread.

There she had it. A pattern of negation, the reverse of all vibration. It was hers now to memorize before returning it to the Chaos. But she needed one other. A defense, a shield. That one was easier to recognize.

But she would have to bring them both back, back to her own body on the rock where Samuel lay bleeding, dying, screaming, his mind dissolving, his music building.

How to take both back? Never done before, not two at once. Must try. There—light, a tiny

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spot of Chaos. Too small, too small, not enough room for both patterns and herself. Would she need *all* of her mind? She would definitely need both patterns. Still, still the light wasn't enough. She needed a guide, a landmark. She opened her mind wide and winced as the Chaos seared it. But there, in a ghostly and maniacal echo, she could hear what she needed. Laughter, harsh, unhuman, inhuman whispered along her mind. It was *them,* the energy ones amused at their game. In that laughter she could hear shadings of even more horrors they would place her in. She shuddered and would have turned to run, even into the deepest part of the fiery Matrix, but she knew that their laughter and their amusement would lead her back to Samuel. So she followed it. Though even to hear it was a torture, she attuned herself with it and followed it back as it uncleanly beckoned her. It was like walking a road of red-hot cinders, or crawling along an avenue of slime. But she clasped that laughter to her because she knew it was her only exit.

She was back, but not nearly half of her. The scene appeared fuzzy to her, as if she looked out on the valley with her eyes half-closed. It was like watching a play while mind-drugged. She knew that she hadn't returned enough to keep full control over both patterns. But any more delay would mean that . . . no, she wouldn't delay. There was enough of her mind with her to do what had to be done.

With the shield pattern she began to build her defenses, but not enough of her had returned from the Matrix. She would not be able to use both patterns fully, and the important one was still unused.

She should save herself, she thought. That's what the Institute would tell her to do. She was Vanessa Insoul and a Commander. But then she looked at Samuel, writhing and tearing at his own flesh.

Samuel, she thought, they want to take the stars away from you. What would you ever do without the stars?

She applied the second pattern fully. The antimotion, antienergy one. She would do what she could with the other, though she knew it wouldn't be enough. All that remained now was to release both patterns.

There may have been a thousand Vanessa Insouls before her, she thought, and a thousand to come. But she was still her own. The decision was hers, no one else's.

She only wished she could move enough to smile.

And then, she released the patterns.

For weeks Samuel was held in the deepest, securest part of the

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Institute. They gave him mind-massage, they implanted a thousand false and happy memories. They did everything they could, but it was months before he spoke. He told them Vanessa's story then, and was not sorry they did not realize it to be his own as well. He left then, and was never heard of again. Some say that far out on the rim of the last galaxy he drove his ship into a star. That he spoke to the world that circled that star for an hour before the end, that he told that world of laughter, and of the stars, and of love. But the rumor may be unfounded.

There is one fact, though. One which the Institute has reliably documented. Near a certain star there is a small, uninhabited planet. There is a valley there, and the air of that place is crisp and still.

There in the valley, in a triangular sward of grass, on a black, obsidian boulder stands Vanessa Insoul the Last. She stands there tall and beautiful, her eyes frozen straight ahead. Her hair is billowed behind her like blonde ice, and no breeze ever disturbs its waves.

Once they sent a condemned man into the valley to recover her body, as even robots refused to go there. When he came back, gibbering, insane and alone, he would only repeat one thing over and over.

"Her eyes are smiling and the air is dead," he would say. But then he died before they could probe him, and they wouldn't waste another man.

Whatever it is, very few tourists visit that world. Those who have, who have journeyed to the fringe of Vanessa's place, refuse to talk about what they have seen. They will only say that there is a cold, hard silence along the hilltops, and that Vanessa stands in the valley below. And, they sometimes add, there is a hint of music about her.

Coming next month . . .

. . . . is the **Robert Sheckley** story that was squeezed out of this issue, along with a new novelet by **Sonya Dorman** (a sequel to "Bye, Bye, Banana Bird," Dec. 1969) about Roxy Rimidon of the Planet Patrol and an entertaining story about an offbeat witch by **Keith Roberts.** The November issue is on sale September 29.

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If you were on hand for our twentieth anniversary issue (October 1969), you'll recall Larry Niven's* GET A HORSE!, *about an agent for the Institute for Temporal Research who is sent back in time to satisfy the whims of a Secretary-General with the mind of a six-year old. In this sequel, the ITR is still working overtime to distract the Secretary-General, and they achieve some spectacular results.*

BIRD IN THE HAND

by Larry Niven

"IT'S NOT A ROC," SAID RA CHEN.

The bird looked stupidly back at them from behind a thick glass wall. Its wings were small and underdeveloped; its legs and feet were tremendous, ludicrous. It weighed three hundred pounds and stood nearly eight feet tall.

Other than that, it looked a lot like a baby chick.

"It kicked me," Svetz complained. A slender, small boned man, he stood stiffly this day, with a slight list to port. "It kicked me in the side and broke four ribs. I barely made it back to the extension cage."

"It still isn't a roc. Sorry about that, Svetz. We did some research in the history section of the Beverly Hills Library while you were in the hospital. The roc was only a legend."

"But look at it!"

Svetz's beefy, red-faced boss nodded. "That's probably what started the legend. Early explorers in Australia saw these—*ostriches* wandering about. They said to themselves, 'If the chicks are this size, what are the adults like?' Then they went home and told stories about the adults."

"I got my ribs caved in for a flightless bird?"

"Cheer up, Svetz. It's not a total loss. The ostrich was extinct. It makes a fine addition to the Secretary-General's vivarium."

"But the Secretary-General wanted a roc. What are you going to tell him?"

Ra Chen scowled. "It's worse than that. Do you know what the Secretary-General wants now?"

People meeting Ra Chen for

**If you weren't, see the offer on page 79.*

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the first time thought he was constantly scowling, until they saw his *scowl*: Svetz had suspected Ra Chen was worried. Now he knew it.

The Secretary-General was everybody's problem. A recessive gene inherited from his powerful, inbred family had left him with the intelligence of a six-year-old child. Another kind of inheritance had made him overlord of the Earth and its colonies. His whim was law throughout the explored universe.

Whatever the Secretary-General wanted now, it was vital that he get it.

"Some idiot took him diving in Los Angeles," Ra Chen said. "Now he insists on seeing the city before it sank."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"It wouldn't be, if it had stopped there. Some of his Circle of Advisors noticed his interest, and they got him historical tapes on Los Angeles. He loved it. He wants to join the first Watts Riot."

Svetz gulped. "That should raise some security problems."

"The Secretary-General is as close to being pure Caucasian as makes no difference."

The ostrich cocked its head to one side, studying them. It still looked like the tremendous chick of an even bigger bird. Svetz could imagine that it had just cracked its way out of an egg the size of a bungalow.

"I'm going to have a headache," he said. "Why do you tell me these things? You *know* I have no head for politics."

"Can you imagine what would happen if we caused the death of the Secretary-General? Already there are powerful factions that would like to see the Institute for Temporal Research disbanded. Space, for instance, they'd *love* to swallow us up."

"But what can we do? We can't turn down a direct request from the Secretary-General!"

"We can distract him."

The had lowered their voices to conspiratorial whispers. Now they turned away from the ostrich and strolled casually down the line of glass cages.

"How?"

"I don't know yet. If I could only get to his nurse," Ra Chen said between his teeth. "I've tried hard enough. Maybe the ISR has bought her. Maybe she's loyal. She's been with him thirty-eight years.

"How do I know what would catch the attention of the Secretary-General? I've only met him four times on formal occasions. I do know his attention span is low. If we could distract him with a new toy, he'd forget about Los Angeles."

The cage they were passing was labeled:

ELEPHANT
Retrieved from the year 700 An-

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teAtomic, approximately, from the region of India, Earth, EXTINCT.

The wrinkled grey beast watched them go by with sleepy indifference. He had not been captured by Svetz.

But Svetz had captured almost half of the animals here, including several whose tanks were half full of water. Svetz was afraid of animals. Especially big animals. Why did Ra Chen keep sending him after animals?

The thirty feet of lizard in the next cage definitely recognized Svetz. It jetted orange-white flame at him and flapped its tiny bat-like wings in fury when the flame washed harmlessly across the glass. If it ever got out—

But that was why the cages were airtight. The animals of Earth's past must be protected from the air of Earth's present.

Svetz remembered the cobalt-blue sky of Earth's past and was reassured. Today's afternoon sky was brilliant turquoise at the zenith, shading through pastel green and yellow to rich yellow-brown near the horizon. Svetz saw it and was reassured. If the Chinese fire-breather ever got out, it would be too busy gasping for purer air to attack Svetz.

"What can we get him? I think he's tired of these animals. Svetz, what about a giraffe?"

"A what?"

"Or a dog, or a satyr . . . it's got to be unusual," Ra Chen muttered. "A teddy bear?"

Out of his fear of animals, Svetz ventured, "I wonder if you might not be on the wrong track, sir."

"Mph? Why?"

"The Secretary-General has enough animals to satisfy a thousand men. Worse than that, you're competing with Space when you bring back funny animals. They can do that too."

Ra Chen scratched behind his ear. "I never thought of that. You're right. But we've got to do *something.*"

"There must be lots of things to do with a time machine."

They could have taken a displacement plate back to the Center. Ra Chen preferred to walk. It would give him a chance to think, he said.

Svetz walked with bowed head and blind eyes alongside his boss. Inspiration had come to him at similar times, when he needed it. But they had reached the red sandstone cube that was the Center, and the mental lightning had not struck.

A big hand closed on his upper arm. "Just a minute," Ra Chen said softly. "The Secretary-General's paying us a visit."

Svetz's heart lurched. "How do you know?"

Ra Chen pointed. "You should recognize that thing on the walk-

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way. We brought it back last month from Los Angeles, June third, twenty-six PostAtomic, the day of the Great California Earthquake. It's an internal combustion automobile. It belongs to the Secretary-General."

"What'll we do?"

"Go in and show him around," Ra Chen said grimly. "Pray he doesn't insist on being taken back to Watts, August eleventh, twenty PostAtomic."

"Suppose he does?"

"I'll have to send him back. Oh, not with you, Svetz. With Zeera. She's black, and she speaks american. It might help."

"Not enough," said Svetz, but he was already calmer. Let Zeera take the risks.

They passed close by the Secretary-General's automobile. Svetz was intrigued by its odd, angular look, its complex control panels, the shiny chrome trim. Someone had removed the hood, so that the polished complexity of the motor was open to view.

"Wait," Svetz said suddenly. "Does he like it?"

"*Will* you come on?"

"Does the Secretary-General like his automobile?"

"Sure, Svetz. He loves it."

"Get him another car. California must have been full of automobiles on the day before the Great Quake."

Ra Chen stopped suddenly. "That could be it. It would hold him for a while, give us time . . ."

"Time for what?"

Ra Chen didn't hear. "A racing car . . . ? No, he'd kill himself. The Circle of Advisors would want to install a robot chauffeur-override. Maybe a dune buggy?"

"Why not ask him?"

"It's worth a try," said Ra Chen. They went up the steps.

In the Center there were three time machines, including the one with the big extension cage, plus a host of panels with flashing colored lights. The Secretary-General liked those. He smiled and chuckled as Ra Chen led him about. His guards hovered at his shoulders, their faces stiff, their fingernails clicking against their gun butts.

Ra Chen introduced Svetz as "my best agent." Svetz was so overwhelmed by the honor he could only stutter. But the Secretary-General didn't seem to notice.

Whether he had forgotten about seeing the Watts Riot was moot, but he did forget to ask on that occasion.

When Ra Chen asked about cars, the Secretary-General smiled all across his face and nodded vigorously. Faced by a vast array of choices, five or six decades with dozens of new models for every year, the Secretary-General put his finger in his mouth and considered well.

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Then he made his choice.

"'Why not ask him? Why not ask him?'" Ra Chen mimicked savagely. "Now we know. The first car! He wants the first car ever made!"

"I thought he'd ask for a *make* of car." Svetz rubbed his eyes hard. "How can we possibly find one car? A couple of decades to search through, and all of the North American and European continents!"

"It's not that bad. We'll use the books from the Beverly Hills Library. But it's bad enough, Svetz . . ."

The raid on the Beverly Hills Library had been launched in full daylight, using the big extension cage and a dozen guards armed with stunners, on June third, twenty-six PostAtomic. Giant time machines, crazy men wearing flying belts—on any other day it would have made every newspaper and television program in the country. But June the third was a kind of Happy Hunting Ground for the Institute for Temporal Research.

No Californian would report the raid, except to other Californians. If the story did get out, it would be swamped by more important news. The series of quakes would begin at sunset . . . had begun at sunset . . .

Svetz and Ra Chen and Zeera Southworth spent half the night going through the history section of the Beverly Hills Library. Ra Chen knew enough white american to recognize titles, but in the end Zeera had to do the reading.

Zeera Southworth was tall and slender and very dark, crowned with hair like a black powder explosion. Among men who worked at the Center she was reputed to be as frigid as the caves of Pluto. She was also the only one who could handle the unique horned horse Svetz had brought back from prehistoric Britain.

She sat gracefully cross-legged, reading pertinent sections aloud, while the others paced. They followed a twisting trail of references . . .

By two in the morning they were damp and furious.

"Nobody invented the automobile!" Ra Chen exploded. "It just happened!"

"We certainly have a wide range of choices," Zeera agreed. "I take it we won't want any of the steam automobiles. That would eliminate Cugnot and Trevithick and the later British steam coaches."

"Thank Science for eliminating *something*."

Svetz said, "Our best bets seem to be Lenoir of France and Marcus of Vienna. Except that Daimler and Benz have good claims, and Selden's patent held good for years—"

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"Dammit, pick one!"

"Just a minute, sir." Zeera alone retained some semblance of calm. "This Ford might be the best we've got."

"Ford? Why? He invented nothing but a system of mass production."

Zeera held up the book. Svetz recognized it: a biography she had been reading earlier. "This book implies that Ford was responsible for everything, that he created the automobile industry single-handed."

"But we know that isn't true," Svetz protested.

Ra Chen made a pushing motion with one hand. "Let's not be hasty. We take Ford's car, and we produce that book to authenticate it. Who'll know the difference?"

"But if someone does the same research we just—oh. Sure. He'll get the same answers. No answers. Ford's just as good a choice as any."

"Better, if nobody looks further," Zeera said with satisfaction. "Too bad we can't take the Model T; it looks much more like an automobile. This thing he started with looks like a kiddy cart. It says he built it out of old pipes."

"Tough," said Ra Chen.

Late the next morning, Ra Chen delivered last minute instructions.

"You can't just take the car," he told Zeera. "If you're interrupted, come back without it."

"Yes, sir. It would be less crucial if we took our duplicate from a later time, from the Smithsonian Institute, for instance."

"The automobile has to be new. Be reasonable, Zeera! We can't give the Secretary-General a second-hand automobile!"

"No, sir."

"We'll land you about three in the morning. Use infrared and pills to change your vision. Don't show any visible light. Artificial light would probably scare them silly."

"Right."

"Were you shown—"

"I know how to use the duplicator." Zeera sounded faintly supercilious, as always. "I also know that it reverses the image."

"Never mind that. Bring back the reversed duplicate, and we'll just reverse it again."

"Of course." She seemed chagrined that she had not seen that for herself. "What about dialect?"

"You speak black and white american, but it's for a later period. Don't use slang. Stick to black unless you want to impress someone white. Then speak white, but speak slowly and carefully and use simple words. They'll think you're from another country. I hope."

Zeera nodded crisply. She stooped and entered the extension cage, turned and pulled the duplicator after her. Its bulk was small, but it weighed a ton or so without

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the lift field generator to float it. One end glowed white with glow-paint.

They watched the extension cage blur and vanish. It was still attached to the rest of the time machine, but attached along a direction that did not transmit light.

"Now then!" Ra Chen rubbed his hands together. "I don't expect she'll have any trouble getting Henry Ford's flightless flight stick. Our trouble may come when the Secretary-General sees what he's got."

Svetz nodded, remembering the grey-and-flat pictures in the history books. Ford's machine was ungainly, slipshod, ugly and undependable. A few small surreptitious additions would make it dependable enough to suit the Secretary-General. *Nothing* would make it beautiful.

"We need another distraction," said Ra Chen. "We've only bought ourselves more time to get it."

Zeera's small time machine gave off a sound of ripping cloth, subdued, monotonous, reassuring. A dozen workmen were readying the big extension cage. Zeera would need it to transport the duplicate automobile.

"There's something I'd like to try," Svetz ventured.

"Concerning what?"

"The roc."

Ra Chen grinned. "The ostrich, you mean. Don't you ever give up? There wasn't any roc, Svetz."

Svetz looked stubborn. "Do you know anything about neoteny?"

"Never heard of it. Look, Svetz, we're going to be over budget because of the roc trip. Not your fault, of course, but another trip would cost us over a million commercials, and—"

"I don't need the time machine."

"Oh?"

"I would like the help of the Palace Veterinarian. Have you got enough pull for that?"

The Palace Veterinarian was a stocky, blocky, busty woman with muscular legs and a thrusting jaw. A floating platform packed with equipment followed her between the rows of cages.

"I know every one of these beasts," she told Svetz. "Once I even thought of giving them names. An animal ought to have a name."

"They've got names."

"That's what I decided. *GILA MONSTER, ELEPHANT, OSTRICH,*" she read. "You give Gilgamesh a name so he won't get mixed up with Gilbert. But nobody would get *HORSE* mixed up with *ELEPHANT*. There's only one of each. It's sad."

"There are the clones."

"Do you know what we do with the clones? We let them grow to infancy, then freeze 'em. Only one at a time of each species is alive." She stopped before the cage marked *OSTRICH*. "Is this your

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prize? I've been meaning to come see him."

The bird shifted its feet in indecision; it cocked its head to consider the couple on the other side of the glass. It seemed surprised at Svetz's return.

"He looks just like a newly hatched chick," she said. "Except for the legs and feet, of course. They seem to have developed to support the extra mass."

Svetz was edgy with the need to be in two places at once. His own suggestion had sparked Zeera's project. He ought to be there. Yet—the ostrich had been his first failure.

He asked, "Does it look neotenous?"

"Neotenous? Obviously. Neoteny is a common method of evolution. We have neotenous traits ourselves, you know. Bare skin, where all the other primates are covered with hair. When our ancestors started chasing their meat across the plains, they needed a better cooling system than most primates need. So they kept one aspect of immaturity, the bare skin.

"The axolotl was a classic example of neoteny—"

"The what?"

"You know what a salamander was, don't you? It had gills and fins while immature. As an adult it grew lungs and shed the gills and lived on land. The axolotl was a viable offshoot that never lost the gills and fins. A gene shift. Typical of neoteny."

"I never heard of either of them, axolotls or salamanders."

"They've been extinct for a long time. They needed open streams and ponds to live."

Svetz nodded. Open water was deadly poison, anywhere on Earth.

"The problem is that we don't know when your bird lost its ability to fly. Some random neotenous developement may have occurred far in the past, so that the bird's wings never developed. Then it may have evolved its present size to compensate."

"Oh. Then the ancestor—"

"May have been no bigger than a turkey. Shall we go in and look?"

The glass irised open to admit them. Svetz stepped into the cage, felt the tug of the pressure curtain flowing over and around him. The ostrich backed warily away.

The vet opened a pouch on her floating platform, withdrew a stunner, and used it. The ostrich squawked in outrage and collapsed. No muss, no fuss.

The vet strode toward her patient—and stopped suddenly in the middle of the cage. She sniffed, sniffed again in horror. "Have I lost my sense of smell?"

Svetz produced two items like cellophane bags, handed her one. "Put this on."

"Why?"

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"You might suffocate if you don't." He donned the other himself, by pulling it over his head, then pressing the rim against the skin of his neck. It stuck. When he finished he had a hermetic seal.

"This air is deadly," he explained. "It's the air of the Earth's past, reconstituted. Think of it as coming from fifteen hundred years ago. There were so few men then that they might as well have never discovered fire, as far as the composition of the air was concerned. That's why you don't smell anything but ostrich. Nothing's been burned yet.

"You don't need sulphur dioxide and carbon dioxide to keep you alive. You do need carbon dioxide. A certain concentration of carbon dioxide in your blood activates the breathing reflex."

She had finished donning her filter helmet. "I take it the concentration is too low in here."

"Right. You'd forget to breath. You're used to air that's four percent carbon dioxide. In here it's barely a tenth of that.

"The bird can breath this bland stuff. In fact, it'd die without it. What we've put into the air in the past fifteen hundred years, we've had fifteen hundred years to adapt to. The ostrich hasn't."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said shortly, so that Svetz wondered if he'd been lecturing someone who knew more than he did. She knelt beside the sleeping ostrich, and the platform floated lower for her convenience.

Svetz watched her as she ministered to the ostrich, taking tissue samples, testing blood pressure and heartbeat in reaction to small doses of hormones and drugs.

In a general way he knew what she was doing. There were techniques for reversing the most recent mutations in an animal's genetic make-up. One did not always get what one expected. Still—there was a *homo habilis* several cages down, who had been in the Circle of Advisors until he called the Secretary-General a tyrannical fugghead.

While she was identifying the neotenous developments, she would also be trying to guess what she would have when they were eliminated. Then there were matters of metabolism. If Svetz was right, the bird's mass would increase rapidly. It must be fed intravenously, and even more rapidly.

In general—but the details of what she was doing were mysterious and dull.

Svetz found himself studying her filter helmet. Full inflation had rendered it almost invisible. A golden rim of it showed by diffraction against the yellow-brown sky.

Did Space really want to take over the Institute for Temporal Research? Then that golden halo was support for their claim. It was

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a semipermeable membrane. It would selectively pass gases in both directions in such a way as to make an almost breathable atmosphere breathable.

It had been taken unchanged from a Space warehouse.

Other ITR equipment had come from the space industries. Flight sticks. Anesthetic needle guns. The low mass antigravity unit in the new extension cage.

But their basic argument was more subtle.

Once the ocean teemed with life, Svetz thought. *Now the continental shelf is as dead as the Moon: nothing but bubble cities. Once this whole continent was all forest and living desert and fresh water. We cut down the trees and shot the animals and poisoned the rivers and irrigated the deserts so that even the desert life died, and now there's nothing left but the food yeast and us.*

We've forgotten so much about the past that we can't separate legend from fact. We've wiped out most of the forms of life on Earth in the last fifteen hundred years, and changed the composition of the air to the extent that we'd be afraid to change it back.

I fear the unknown beasts of the past. I cannot breathe the air. I cannot recognize the edible plants. I would not kill animals for food. I don't know which would kill me.

The Earth's past is as foreign to me as another planet.

The Palace Veterinarian was busy hooking the ostrich intravenously to tubing of several colors.

Svetz's pocket phone rang.

For a wild moment Svetz considered not answering. But good manners won out, and Svetz opened the phone.

"There's trouble," said Ra Chen's image. "Zeera's cage is on its way back. She must have pulled the go-home lever right after she called for the big extension cage."

"She left before the big cage could get there?"

"Yah," said Ra Chen. "Whatever happened must have happened fast. If she called for the big cage, then she had the automobile. A moment later she aborted the mission. Svetz, I'm worried."

"I'd hate to leave now, sir." Svetz turned to look at the ostrich. In that moment all of the bird's feathers fell out, leaving it plump and naked.

That decided him. "I can't leave now, sir. We'll have a full-grown roc in a few minutes."

"What? *Good!* But how?"

"The ostrich was a neotenous offshoot of the roc. We've produced a throwback."

"Good! Stick with it, Svetz. We'll handle it here." Ra Chen switched off.

The Palace Veterinarian said, "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

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Svetz's heart leapt. "Trouble?"

"No. It's going beautifully so far."

"All the feathers fell out. Is that good?"

"Don't worry about it. See for yourself: already there's a coat of down: Your ostrich is reverting to chickhood," she said cheerfully. "It's ancestor's chickhood. If the ancestor really was no bigger than a turkey before it lost the ability to fly, it'll be even smaller as a chick."

"What'll happen then?"

"It'll drown in its own fat."

"We should have taken a clone."

"Too late. Look at it now; look at the legs. They aren't nearly as overdeveloped."

The bird was a big ball of pale yellow down. Its frame had shrunk, but its legs had shrunk much more. Standing, it would have been no more than four feet tall. The extra mass had turned to fat, so that the ostrich was nearly spherical; it bulged like a poolside toy, lying on its inflated side in a pool of feathers.

"Now it *really* looks like a chick," said Svetz.

"It does, Svetz. In fact, it is. That was a *big* chick. The adult is going to be tremendous." The Palace Veterinarian jumped to her feet. "Svetz, we've got to hurry. Is there a basic yeast source in this cage?"

"Sure. Why?"

"He'll starve at the rate he's growing, unless . . . just show me, Svetz."

The animals of the Zoo ate yeast, like everyone else, but with special additives for each animal. A brain tap could induce the animal to imagine it was eating whatever it was used to eating when the time probe had picked it up.

Svetz showed her the yeast tap. She hooked the pipeline to one of the machines on her floating platform; she made adaptions, added another machine. . . .

The bird grew visibly. Its fat layer shrank, deflated. Its legs and wings stretched outward. The beak began to take a distinctive hooked form, sharp and wicked looking.

Svetz began to feel panic. Beneath its downy feathers the bird was little more than taut skin stretched over long bones.

The yeast was now feeding directly into two tanks on the floating platform, and from there into the colored tubes. Somehow the Palace Veterinarian was converting the yeast directly into sugar-plasma.

"It's working now," she said. "I wasn't sure it would. He'll be all right now, if the growth cycle slows down in time." She smiled up at him. "You were right all along. The ostrich was a neotenous roc."

At that moment the light changed.

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Svetz wasn't sure what had disturbed him. But he looked up—and the sky was baby blue from the horizon to the zenith.

"What is it?" The woman beside him was bemused rather than frightened. "I never saw a color like that in my life!"

"I have."

"What is it?"

"Don't worry about it. But keep your filter helmet on, especially if you have to leave the cage. Can you remember that?"

"Of course." Her eyes narrowed. "You know something about this, Svetz. It's something to do with time, isn't it?"

"I think so." Svetz used the key beam then, to avoid further questions. The glass peeled back to let him out.

He turned for a last look through the glass.

The Palace Veterinarian looked frightened. She must have guessed too much for her own comfort. But she turned away to care for her patient.

The ostrich lay on its side, its eyes open now. It was tremendous, and still scrawny despite the volume of the intravenous feed. Its feathers were changing color. The bird would be black and green.

It was half as big as the elephant next door . . . whose air of grey wisdom was giving way to uneasiness as he watched.

It looked nothing like an ostrich.

The sky was baby blue, the blue of the deep past, crossed with fluffy clouds of clean and shining white. Blue from the horizon to the zenith, without a trace of the additives that ought to be there.

Unconscious men and women lay everywhere. Svetz dared not stop to help. What he had to do was more important.

He slowed to a walk as he neared the Center. There was pain like a knife blade inserted between his partly healed ribs.

ITR crewmen had fallen in the walkway around the Center, presumably after staggering outside. And there was the Secretary-General's automobile sitting quietly in front. Behind it, flat on his back, was Ra Chen.

What did he think he was doing there?

Svetz heard the purr of the motor as he approached. So that was it. Ra Chen must have hoped that the exhaust would revive him. Damn clever; and it should have worked. Why hadn't it?

Svetz looked into the polished metal guts of the motor as he passed. The motor had changed . . . somehow. What ran it now? Steam? Electricity? A flywheel? In any event, the exhaust pipe Ra Chen had been searching for was no longer there.

Ra Chen was alive, his pulse rapid and frantic. But he wasn't

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breathing. Or . . . yes, he was. He was breathing perhaps twice a minute as carbon dioxide built up enough to activate the reflex.

Svetz went on into the Center.

More than a dozen men and women had collapsed across lighted control panels. Three more figures sprawled in an aisle. The Secretary-General lay in angular disorder, smiling foolishly up at the ceiling. His guards wore troubled sleeping expressions and held drawn guns.

The small extension cage had not returned.

Svetz looked into the empty gap in the time machine, and felt terror. What could he accomplish without Zeera to tell him what had gone wrong?

From 50 AnteAtomic to the present was a thirty minute trip. Ra Chen's call to the Zoo must have come less than thirty minutes ago. Weird, how an emergency could telescope time.

Unless that was a side effect of the paradox. Unless the paradox had chopped away Zeera's extension cage and left her stranded in the past, or cast off into an alternate world line, or . . .

There had never been a temporal paradox.

Math was no help. The mathematics of time travel was riddled with singularities.

Last year somebody had tried to do a topological analysis of the path of an extension cage. He had proved not only that time travel was impossible, but that you couldn't travel faster than light either. Ra Chen had leaked the news to Space on the off chance that their hyperdrive ships would stop working.

What to do? Start putting filter helmets on everyone? Great, but the helmets weren't kept at the Center; he'd have to go across town. Did he dare leave the Center?

Svetz forced himself to sit down.

Minutes later, he snapped alert at the *pop* of displaced air. The small extension cage had returned. Zeera was crawling out of the circular doorway.

"Get back in there," Svetz ordered. "Quick!"

"I don't take orders from you, Svetz." She brushed past him and looked about her. "The automobile's gone. Where's Ra Chen?" Zeera's face was blank with shock and exhaustion. Her voice was a monotone, ragged at the edges.

Svetz took her arm. "Zeera, we've—"

She jerked away. "We've got to *do* something. The automobile's gone. Didn't you hear me?"

"Did you hear *me*? Get back in the extension cage!"

"But we've got to decide what to *do*. Why can't I smell anything?" She sniffed at air that was scentless, empty, dead. She looked

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about herself in bewilderment, realizing for the first time just how strange everything was.

Then the eyes rolled up in her head, and Svetz stepped forward to catch her.

He studied her sleeping face across the diameter of the extension cage. It was very different from her waking face. Softer, more vulnerable. And prettier. Zeera had quite a pretty face.

"You should relax more often," he said.

His ribs throbbed where the ostrich had kicked him. The pain seemed to beat like a heart.

Zeera opened her eyes. She asked, "Why are we in here?"

"The extension cage has its own air system," said Svetz. "You can't breath the outside air."

"Why not?"

"You tell me."

Her eyes went wide. "The automobile! It's gone!"

"Why?"

"I don't know. Svetz, I *swear* I did everything right. But when I turned on the duplicator the automobile disappeared!"

"That . . . doesn't sound at all good." Svetz strove to keep his voice level. "What did you—"

"I did it just the way they taught me! I hooked the glow-painted end to the frame, set the dials for an estimated mass plus a margin of error, read the dials off—"

"You must have hooked up the wrong end somehow. Wait a minute. Were you using the infrared flash?"

"Of course. It was dead of night."

"And you'd taken the pills so you'd be able to see infrared."

"Do you always think that slowly, Svetz?" Then her eyes changed, and Svetz knew she'd seen it. "I was seeing infrared. Of course. I hooked up the hot end."

"The duplicator end. Sure. That would duplicate empty space where there was an automobile. You'd get emptiness at both ends."

Zeera relaxed against the curved side of the extension cage, with her arms hooked under her knees. Presently she said, "Henry Ford sold that automobile for two hundred dollars, according to the book. Later he had trouble getting financed. Could the money have been crucial?"

"It must have been. How much is two hundred dollars?"

"Then someone else used mass production to make automobiles. And he must have liked steam or electricity."

"Steam, I'd guess. Steam came first."

"Tell me this, Svetz. If the air changed, why didn't we change with it? We evolved to be able to breath air with a certain percentage of carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide and nitrous and nitric oxides and so forth.

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Shouldn't the evolution have been canceled too? For that matter, who do we remember?"

"There's a lot we don't know about time travel. How do you expect logic to hold when paradoxes hold too?"

"Does that mean you don't know?"

"Yes."

"I'm not nagging, Svetz. I don't know either."

More silence.

"It's clear enough," Zeera said presently. "I'll have to go back and warn myself to get the duplicator on straight."

"That won't work. It didn't work. If you'd gotten the ends of the duplicator straight, we wouldn't be *in* this mess. Therefore you didn't."

She looked irritated. "Too logical. Well, what then?"

"Maybe we can go *around* you." Svetz hesitated, then plunged in. "Try this. Send me back to an hour before the earlier Zeera arrives. The automobile won't have disappeared yet. I'll duplicate it, duplicate the duplicate, take the reversed duplicate and the original automobile past you in the big extension cage. That lets you destroy the duplicate. I reappear after you're gone, leave the original automobile, and come back here with the reversed duplicate. How's that?"

"It sounded great. Would you mind going through it again?"

"Let's see. I go back to—"

She was laughing at him. "Never mind. But it has to be me, Svetz. You couldn't find your way. You couldn't ask directions or read the street signs. You'll have to stay here and man the machinery."

Reluctantly Svetz agreed.

They were leaving the extension cage when there came a scream like the end of the world.

Momentarily they froze. Then Svetz ran around the swelling flank of the cage. Zeera followed, wearing the filter helmet she had worn during her attempt to duplicate Ford's automobile.

One wall of the Center was glass. It framed a crest of hill across from the palace and a double row of cages that made up the Zoo. One of the cages was breaking apart as they watched, smashing itself to pieces like—

—Like an egg hatching. And like a chick emerging, the roc stood up in the ruin of its cage.

The scream came again.

"What is it?" Zeera whispered.

"It was an ostrich. I'd hate to give it a name now."

The bird seemed to move in slow motion. There was so much of it! Green and black, beautiful and evil, big as eternity, and a crest of golden feathers had sprouted on its forehead. Its hooked beak descended toward a cage.

That cage ripped like paper.

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Zeera was shaking his arm. "Come on! If it came from the Zoo, we don't need to worry about it. It'll suffocate when we get the car back where it belongs."

"Oh. Right," said Svetz. They went to work moving the big extension cage a few hours further back in time.

When Svetz looked again, the bird was just taking to the air. Its wings flapped like sails, and their black shadows swept like cloud shadows over the houses. As the roc rose fully into view, Svetz saw that something writhed and struggled in its tremendous talons.

Svetz recognized it . . . and realized just how big the roc really was.

"It's got *ELEPHANT*," he said. An inexplicable sorrow gripped his heart; inexplicable, for Svetz hated animals.

"What? Come *on*, Svetz!"

"Um? Oh, yes." He helped Zeera into the small extension cage and sent it on its way.

Despite its sleeping crew, the machinery of the Center seemed to be working perfectly. If anything got off, Svetz would have six men's work to do. Therefore he prowled among the control boards, alert for any discrepancy, making minor adjustments . . . And occasionally he looked out the picture window.

The roc reached a tremendous height. Any ordinary bird would have been invisible long since. But the roc was all too visible, hovering in the blue sky while it killed and ate *ELEPHANT*.

Time passed.

Twenty minutes for Zeera to get back.

More time to make two duplicates of the automobile. Load them into the big extension cage. Then to signal Svetz—

The signal came. She had the cars; she wanted to be moved forward. Svetz played it safe and moved her forward six hours almost to dawn. She might be caught by an early riser, but at least Ford would have his automobile.

The roc had finished its bloody meal. *ELEPHANT* was gone, bones and all. And—Svetz watched until he was sure—the bird was dropping, riding down the sky on outstretched wings.

Svetz watched it grow bigger, and bigger yet, until it seemed to enfold the universe. It settled over the Center like a tornado cloud, in darkness and wind. Like twin tornado funnels, two sets of curved talons touched down in the walkway.

The bird bent low. An inhuman face looked in at Svetz through the picture window. It nearly filled the window.

It knows me, Svetz thought. Even a bird's brain must be intelligent in a head that size.

The vast head rose ponderously out of sight above the roof.

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I had the ostrich. I should have been satisfied, thought Svetz. *A coin in the hand is worth two in the street.* The ancient proverb could as easily be applied to birds.

The roof exploded downward around a tremendous hooked beak. Particles of concrete spattered against walls and floor. A yellow eye rolled and found Svetz, but the beak couldn't reach him. Not through *that* hole.

The head withdrew through the roof.

Three red lights. Svetz leapt for the board and began twisting dials. He made two lights turn green, then the third. It had not occurred to him to run. The bird would find him wherever he hid.

There! Zeera had pulled the go-home lever. From here it was all automatic.

Crash!

Svetz was backed up against the big time machine, pinned by a yellow eye as big as himself. Half the roof was gone, but still the bird's beak couldn't reach him. But a great talon came seeking him through the shattered glass.

The light changed.

Svetz sagged. Behind the green and black feathers he could see that the sky had turned pale yellow-green, marked with yellow-brown streamers of cloud.

The bird sniffed incredulously. It didn't have to be told twice. Its head rose through the ceiling; it stepped back from the Center for clearance; its great wings came down like thunderclouds.

Svetz stepped out to watch it rise.

He had to hug an ornamental pillar. The wind of its wings was a hurricane. The bird looked down once, and recognized him, and looked away.

It was still well in view, rising and circling, when Zeera stepped out to join him. Presently Ra Chen was there to follow their eyes. Then half the Center maintenance team was gaping upward in awe and astonishment . . . while the bird dwindled to a black shadow. Black against pale green, climbing, climbing.

One sniff had been enough. The bird's brain was as enormously proportioned as the rest of it. It had started climbing immediately, without waiting to snatch up its dessert.

Climbing, climbing toward the edge of space. Reaching for clean air.

The Secretary-General stood beside Svetz, smiling in wonder, chuckling happily as he gazed upward.

Was the roc still climbing? No, the black shadow was growing larger, sliding down the sky. And the slow motion of the wings had stopped.

How was a roc to know that there was no clean air anywhere?

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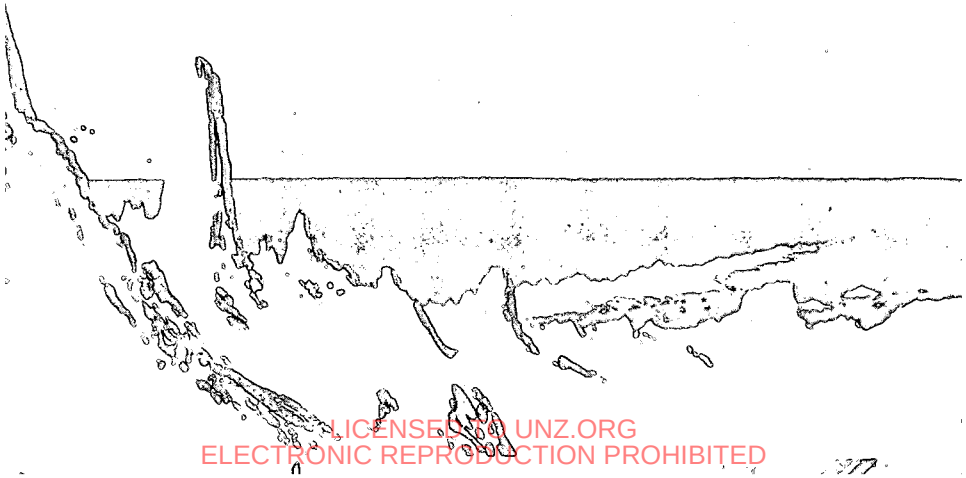

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